UNDER FOCH'S COMMAND

CAPTAIN BRERETON

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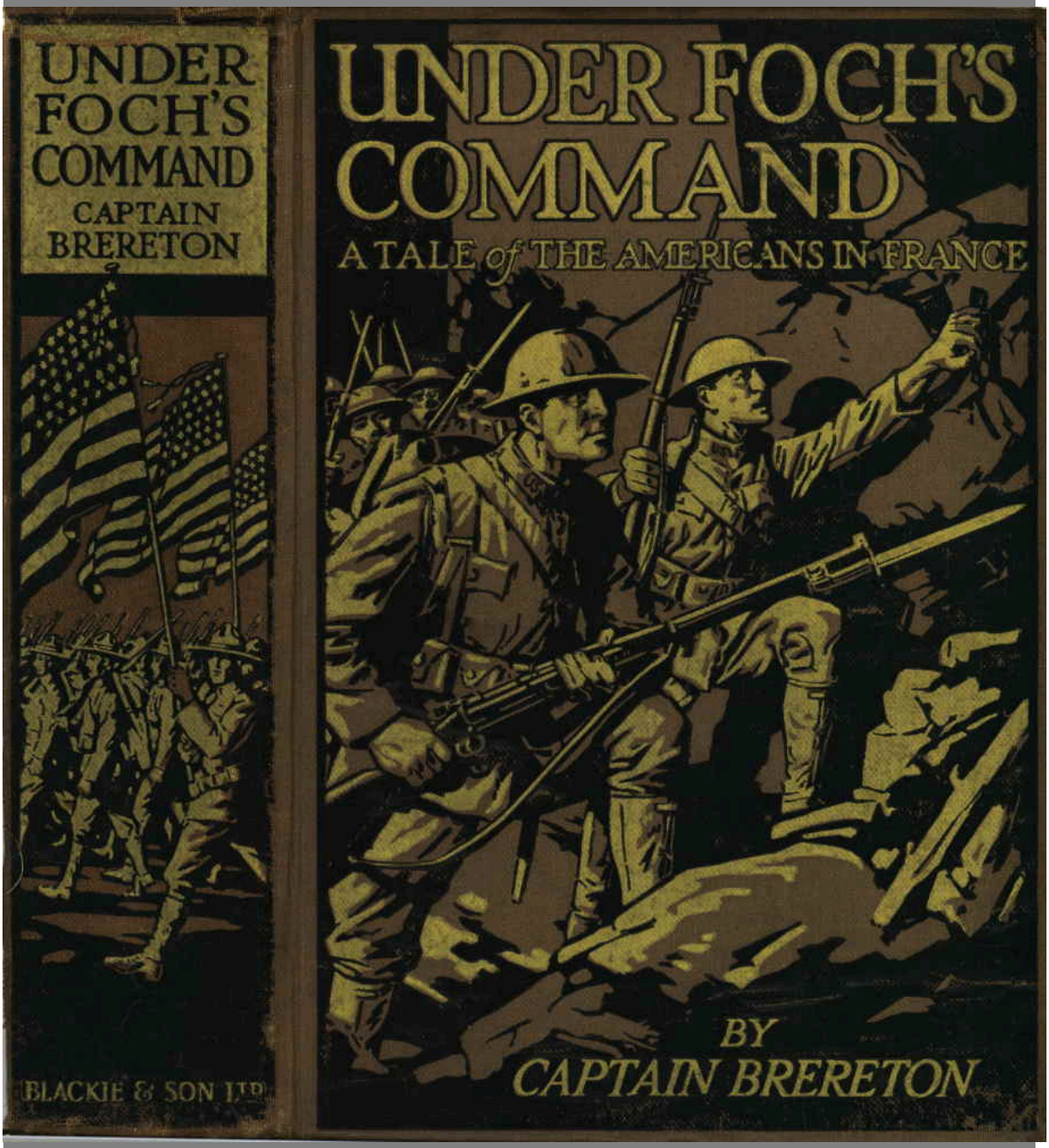
A TALE of THE AMERICANS IN FRANCE

BY

CAPTAIN BRERETON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Under Foch's Command: A Tale of the Americans in France

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Title: Under Foch's Command: A Tale of the Americans in France

Author: F. S. Brereton

Illustrator: Walter Paget

Release date: January 8, 2021 [eBook #64236]
Most recently updated: October 18, 2024

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/64236

Credits: Juliet Sutherland, Martin Pettit and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at https://www.pgdp.net

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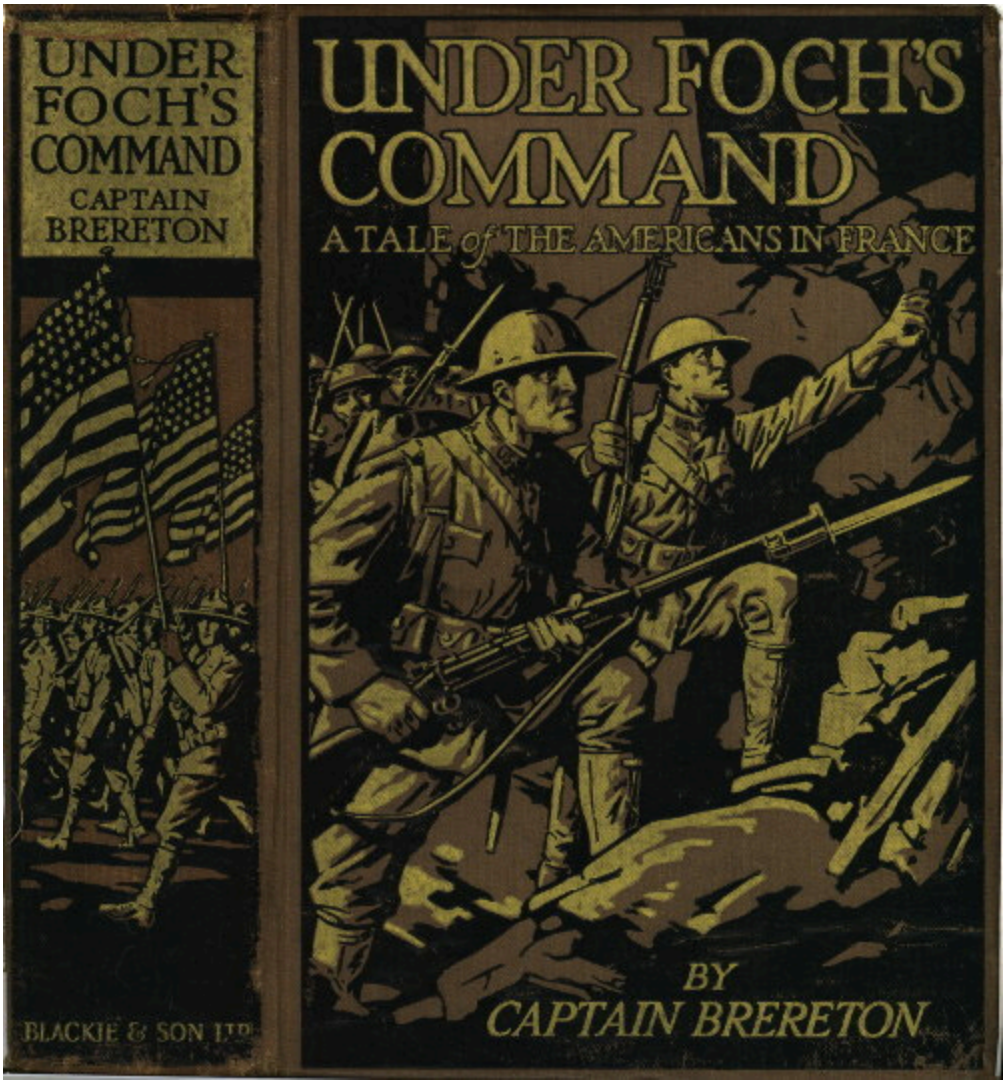

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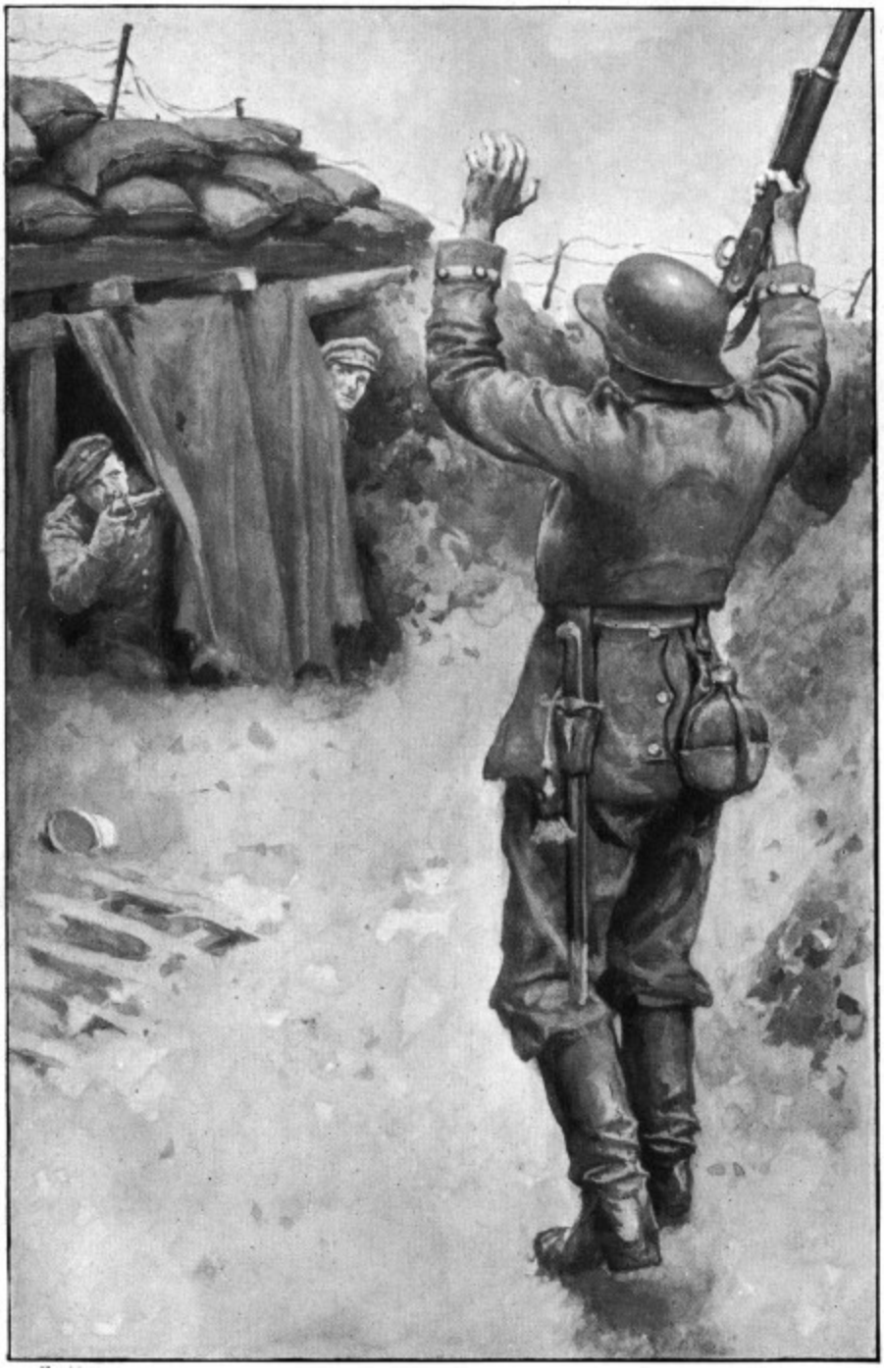

THE GERMAN "GOT HIM" AT ONCE

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A Tale of the Americans in France

BY

CAPTAIN F. S. BRERETON

Author of "The Armoured-car Scouts"
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UNDER FOCH'S COMMAND

CHAPTER I
An American Declaration

It was one of those glorious days which they enjoy so frequently west of the giant range of the Rocky Mountains, an exhilarating day when one rises from one's bed and issues into the open to discover a snap in the air. For spring was but just coming, and the mountains were still clad in snow and in hoar frost; the atmosphere positively sparkled, while the rays of the sun coming aslant through a giant canyon swept across the steep slopes of the mountain, where it encompassed the apparently sleeping city down below, and were reflected from thousands of minute angles, from masses of virgin snow, and from icicles which had gathered since the previous evening. Could one have clambered into those mountains, or into the canyon we have mentioned, one would have found here and there spring flowers already pushing their tender buds through the coating of snow, here far thinner than higher up towards the peaks of the range. In a hundred hollows little rivulets were running, while towards the centre of the canyon to which all progressed, some at speed and some leisurely, there raced a brook, gathering size at an inordinate pace, sweeping on its surface masses of half-melted snow, flashing here and there as the rays struck upon bubbling eddies, and then plunging beneath an arch of snow, to go tumbling over rocks farther down, and so speed on towards the city.

Compare this scene with the peaks above, still ice-bound, with spring hardly come as yet, so that residence at that elevation was not to be encouraged. Compare it with the city down below: a city of wide, well-swept, tree-edged streets, of big houses and wide open spaces, green already. Down there was a different scene, throbbing with life, though from the heights above it appeared to be slumbering; with busy cars clanging their way and motor-cars dashing hither and thither. Seen from the heights above it presented a whitish blotch, picked out by red roofs here and there, and by dark streaks which represented the roads. It appeared to be a gigantic gridiron, for every block of houses was square, and the roads intersected one another at right angles.

Out beyond it see the glimmer from a vast expanse of water—a lake—the first glimpse of which astounded and delighted the eyes of Brigham Young and those pioneers who, forsaking the East, fought their way across the prairie to discover a new land, and, peeping downward at the sight we are presenting to our reader, imagined they had gained a fertile country—a country flowing with milk and honey. Fertile indeed it looks from the mountains: trees by the thousand stretch out on every hand, casting a delightful shade, and farther afield green patches of vast extent hug the lake and stretch away into the open country, with brown squares here and there, on which fruit farms abound, and where dairy-men work for their living. But hasten to the lake, dip a hand in it, and taste the water. It is brine. For down there is a huge salt lake, which gives its name to the city. Down below there is Utah, which, for all its salt lake and its salt desert, has been termed "God's own country".

Ten miles away perhaps, beyond the smoke of the city, yet surrounded in the smoke and dust which it itself creates, lies a copper-mine of world-wide notoriety. Rails run hither and thither; tubs and trucks clank over them; while the mountain side, which the active hands of man and the never-ceasing grinding of machinery is eating away at a rapid pace, presents a series of steps, as it were, along which other rails are laid, where locomotives grunt, where trucks screech their way past the wide openings which give admission to the centre of the mountain.

"And that is you, Jim," said one young fellow as he dropped out of a passing truck and accosted another; "just coming off, eh? Then let's walk home together. It takes longer, I know, for we could ride in the trucks down to the bottom of the mountain; but a walk's a walk; it does one good at this hour in the morning."

"Sure," the other answered, with that drawl common to men of his country. "While we walk we can talk about the situation. What'll you do, eh? I've been itching this two years past to be up and away. Of course I know that some people must work, for copper's needed, and so are thousands of other articles, but——"

"But," said Dan, looking sharply round at him—"but for us young chaps the time's come for fighting."

They trudged on down the rocky slope along which the rails ran, descending gradually and by an easy grade to the bottom, and thence to the smelting plant, where the ore was crushed and treated. They walked between the rails which carried, every day and all day and night too, long lines of trucks, heavily laden, needing no locomotive to carry them to their destination, they stepped aside now and again at some siding to pass another train, this time of empty trucks being dragged up by a smoking engine, and for a while they did not exchange another word. For their thoughts, like the thoughts of everyone in America at that moment, whether East or West, North or South, were filled to overflowing.

Armageddon, the world war which had broken out with such irresistible violence and so unexpectedly—at least unexpectedly to Americans—in the year 1914, had progressed through long weary months to this eventful year of 1917. Tales of tragedy had reached America; thousands of men had heard or read of atrocities committed by the Germans in Belgium, and had ground their teeth and become almost violent. Still more thousands of men had taken a firm grip of themselves and had looked at the situation as dispassionately as was possible.

"No! Not yet—not yet," they had told themselves. "America loves peace; we are a democratic nation, all men, from the President downwards, are equal—as good the one as the other; we wish no harm to anyone in the world; we desire only to work, to thrive, to live surrounded by freedom and justice, only——"

And then heads wagged, men looked doubtful, some cursed. The women, fearful of what might follow, fearful lest America should be drawn into this gigantic conflict, and their men-folk—their husbands and their sons—take up the cudgels, yet perhaps more susceptible than the men, feeling more acutely the sufferings of their distant sisters, spoke out:

"What of the *Lusitania*? Are American women and children then to be sent to the bottom of the ocean because the Kaiser ordains that none but German ships shall sail the seas? Is no American vessel to make its way to England, to France, or any other country without fear that the torpedo of a German submarine may explode beneath her? Is that the idea that American men hold of freedom and justice?"

"Bah!" American men were getting out of hand; even the wonderful patience of President Wilson was becoming exhausted. For see, since the *Lusitania* had been sunk on a peaceful voyage in 1915, other vessels had followed the same way; more lives had been lost, citizens of the great Republic of America had fallen victims to the ruthless acts of German pirates; and now the Kaiser had ordained that America must cease her traffic on the ocean altogether. She might by his consent send a few vessels across to Europe, and these must be painted in vivid colours, must follow certain tracks, must obey the orders of the "All-Highest".

"And this is his idea of freedom, eh?" Jim Carpenter shouted all of a sudden, catching Dan Holman by the shoulder, his face flushed a deep red, his eyes glowing as through a mist. "I say, who's going to put up with that sort of bullying, for bullying it is sure? Say now, Dan, supposing you and I lived in Salt Lake City, and you were to say to me: 'Here you, clear out!—slick off! Salt Lake City ain't the place to hold both you and me. Quit!—without more talking!'"

"Huh!" growled Dan, and walked on. "Huh!" he repeated, and there was more than disgust in his voice.

"Just so," said Jim, proceeding. "You and I are chums, Dan, and such a thing ain't likely to happen; only, supposing it was the other way, just sort of half-friendly, as Germany and America are supposed to be at this moment, and you out with such orders, d'you think——?"

"Do I think!" growled Dan, almost shouted it. "Don't I know that you'd tell me to mind my own business—to quit talking nonsense, that you'd up and say that you was as good a man, and that if I wanted to turn you out of the city, why, I'd better get to business. And that's the answer all of us hope the President will send to this Kaiser."

From west to east and north to south they were discussing the same theme, the men in their clubs, in their hotels, and their offices and elsewhere; and the women, keeping the tidy homes which America possesses, were wondering, hoping against hope many of them still, that war might be averted, while praying that nothing might happen to sully the honour of America.

In the capital, at Washington, on this very day, there were collected all the wise heads of the community, all the nominated representatives of the States of this vast country. Even as Jim and Dan reached the valley below, and trudged along towards the hostel where they boarded, the decision of America was being taken, the wires were singing with the words transmitted over them, telephones were buzzing, and that noble speech which President Wilson delivered to Congress was being swept to the far corners of the country.

"It is war!" said a man who suddenly emerged from a store that the two young fellows were passing, waving his hat over his head—an uncouth, rough individual wearing a slouch hat, a somewhat frayed coat with many stains about it, a pair of blue trousers tucked into big, high boots, and a tie red enough in all conscience. "War!" he shouted. "The President ain't goin' to stand any more o' this nonsense. He's told the Kaiser slick that if America wants to send ships over the sea, and of course she wants to do so, she'll do it without permission from him or any other man who likes to style himself 'All-Highest'. He's told that German crowd that his patience is worn out, that America, although she hates war, is going to war for the principles that are dearer to her than almost to anyone. He's intimated to the Kaiser that he'll call upon him somewhere in France and on the sea too, and fight the question out till one of 'em's top dog, and that'll be America and her allies."

The fellow threw his hat into the air, and, running up to Jim and Dan, shook them by the hand. "I know what you think," he said, bubbling over with enthusiasm—"you two young chaps that's often chatted it over with me; you've been waiting for the day. You, like thousands and thousands more of us, will go across yonder to take the President's message to the Kaiser—eh?"

They shook hands eagerly on it, and for a while stood there chatting. For they had each of them much to say. Indeed, there were groups eagerly talking everywhere in this mining encampment: in the houses wherein the married people had their quarters, in the hostels where bachelors roomed and boarded, and farther away, where the ore from this giant copper mountain was smelted, in the hostels there, and amongst the clanking machinery.

"War! America's at war!"

In spite of the fact that thousands of them had anticipated the event, it struck them like a whirlwind, left them almost speechless, or, contrariwise, set them shouting. Pass along the street and see men dressed as they are in those parts—their hands in leather gloves, their coats wide open, and often their shirts too at the neck, arguing, speaking in loud tones and most emphatically, or talking in some quiet corner to a group of friends who listen intently. In the stores along the street they had stopped business, and customers and men behind the counter exchanged views on the situation. In the saloons, where spirits and other liquors were served, there was excitement; much, it must be confessed, in one of them which bore no very enviable reputation. For into this place a motley throng lounged or swaggered every day of the week: Spaniards, who had come to America to delve a way to fortune; Poles, and Greeks, and Russians, who had come from their own lands to make wealth more rapidly; Austrians, Turks, and Germans also come here to seek a short road to prosperity. They were seated at tables along one wall, or stood at the bar talking heatedly like those others outside, or whispered to one another. But behind the bar there was no whispering on the part of the ruddy-faced and jovial tender whose duty it was to serve drinks to those thirsty mining people.

"War!" he shouted, and brought a big brawny fist down upon the counter with a bang which set glasses jingling. "War at last, and not too soon neither. Down with Germans and all that's German, say I, and I've said it these months past. Down with the Kaiser!"

A man lounging there not six feet from him, a huge hat over his eyes, and collar turned up as if to hide his features, leaned across the counter and tapped the bar-tender on the shoulder.

"Say," he drawled, and with a distinctly guttural accent. "You vos for war? Ha! And you haf said: 'Down mit the Germans and Germany!'"

"Sure!" shouted the barman, rocking with laughter; "and so says every one of us. I'm not one for politics; I'm just a plain straightforward American, with plenty of friends and a good home, but I bar the slaughter of women, and I don't take orders from no one. Nor shall America! That's why I'm glad that it's going to be war. That's why I say: 'Down with the Germans!'"

Men raised their heads as they sat at the tables, and looked across at the bar-tender; many of them smiled, some nodded, and others laughed outright.

"Just Charles," one of them said, "the brightest, jolliest fellow we've ever had. It does one good to look at him. And he's downright. Say, Charles!" he called out, "I'm with you. Down with the Germans! I'm glad it's war. Let's get in and whop 'em."

The man leaning against the bar counter turned his head towards the speaker and scowled.

"A German," another of the customers at a table near at hand observed, *sotto voce*, to his comrade. "It's said that he's been over this side only a matter of six months, and chances are that he's a German agent, though he'd tell you that he's American to the backbone. A sulky-looking beggar."

"Say!" that individual began again, as he stretched over the bar, and once more tapped the bar-tender on the shoulder, "you said down mit Germans and Germany?"

"Aye, sure!"

"And what then? And down mit the Kaiser also?"

"Of course," flashed Charlie, "him first of all, because then it'll be easier to knock sense into the heads of the Germans."

There was a flash, a loud report, and a column of smoke just where the bar-tender had been standing. Men sprang to their feet; one rushed across to support the tottering figure of Charlie, while a second man sprang towards the individual who had been leaning against the counter. Then he recoiled, for a revolver muzzle looked steadily at him.

"Don't move," came in even tones from the rascal who had just fired. "Stand back every one of you, I mean business."

He backed to the door of the saloon, and pushed his way through it; then, turning on his heel, and thrusting his still smoking weapon into his pocket, he sped down the street, passed Jim and Dan, who were still discussing the question of war with animation, and so towards the mountain.

Here, miles away in the heart of America as it were, the Kaiser had indirectly brought about yet another tragedy; for undoubtedly one of his emissaries had carried the war far afield, and had done here, as ruthlessly as could well be imagined, the wishes of his master.

CHAPTER II
The Sheriff's Posse

Imagine the commotion that ensued in the mining city which lay at the foot of that giant mountain which the industry of man is slowly eating away. That shot which had rung out in the saloon near which Jim Carpenter and Dan Holman, his bosom chum, happened to be standing—listening to the harangue of that bearded and excitable person who had announced the declaration of war to them—though it was muffled by the windows of the saloon itself and by the half-door which closed the entrance, yet attracted the ears of quite a number. Nevertheless the figure which presently emerged and went off down the street escaped attention. Then an avalanche poured into the street.

"Where's he gone? Which way did he turn? Where's that German?"

"German?" asked Jim. "What's happened? We heard a shot, and guessed there must be a shindy in the saloon. Still, there have been others, so we didn't take much notice. As to seeing anyone coming out, that we did not, for we weren't quite sure where the sound came from, and were looking the other way. Who's the man? What's happened?"

"What's happened!" exclaimed a heated individual, a tall, lithe, broad-shouldered and clean-shaven American, tapping Jim in friendly fashion on the shoulder. "Let me tell you, sir, the cruellest and most bloodthirsty murder that the Kaiser has ever committed!"

Dan stood back a pace and stared at the man in amazement. "The Kaiser," he exclaimed, "here? Surely——"

Another face was thrust forward into the circle now standing about Jim and Dan. "He didn't mean the Kaiser himself," this lusty miner cried. "George, here, is talking of what the Kaiser's brought about through one more of his rascally agents. Listen here: a man was standing up against the bar counter five minutes ago; a chap that's not long been in these parts, but I happen to know something about him, and that something is that he's a German. Well

now, what d'you think happened? Charlie, the most jovial fellow that ever served a glass to any of us, states the case squarely and aloud, just as he's been used to: says as he's glad it's war, says as he thought it was high time we Americans were in it, and just downs the Kaiser with a bang of his fist."

"And then this here scoundrel of a German chap shoots him point-blank! Where's he got to?" shouted another.

It was less than five minutes later that the Sheriff, hastily summoned by telephone, came cantering up the street, and after him his posse, collected from all parts from men who had already been selected to act as special police in case of trouble arising, well acquainted with their duty, and hurrying from their work, from their houses, from wherever they might have been, all mounted on horseback, and making for the centre of the mining city.

Let us say that though the old mining cities and villages of America now wear a totally different aspect, and lead a supremely different life from that common in the '40's, yet "hold-ups" still occur in places; ruffians even now are come across, and every now and again there is a broil, and some tragedy or crime is perpetrated. Here then was one, and already the Sheriff and his men were seeking for the culprit.

"He came right round along the street down here," a man bellowed, running up a few moments later; "a dark man, with his coat collar turned up and hat pulled over his eyes?"

"That's the one," they shouted.

"And hops into one of the trucks making up the mountain; it'll be well up the slope now. He's setting his tracks for the workings."

At once there was an exodus; the crowd broke up, the Sheriff and his men galloping off to ascend the mountain by a winding track, whilst Jim and Dan and twenty more dived for their own homes, then, armed with the best weapons they possessed, turned out again, and, clambering aboard a train of empty trucks going upwards, made for one of the tunnels which had been cut into the heart of the mountain.

"We've telephoned round to the other side to tell 'em to close the exit, and I've told off parties of men to watch every one of the openings on this side," the Sheriff told them as they alighted opposite one of the huge galleries which gave access to the mountain. "Next thing is to have a confab. We've got to get that fellow out, but we'd best remember it's dark in there, there are cuttings this way and that, and galleries running everywhere, so lights are wanted, and, after that, guides."

Jim stepped forward and Dan with him. "How'll we do?" they asked.

"You?"

"Yep!" declared Jim, with the curt assurance of a young American. "Dan and I have worked here since we were boys, and know every tunnel and every cutting. As to lights, Mr. Sheriff, I don't know. You see——"

"How's that?" demanded the Sheriff. "No lights! Waal, that gets me!"

"You see," explained Dan, coming to the assistance of Jim, for he had seen his reasons instantly, "the man who enters the workings carrying a lamp will draw fire, if that fellow means to do more shooting."

For a moment or so there was silence, the Sheriff pushing his hat back from his head and rubbing his forehead, while the men about him looked at one another and nodded.

"Mebbe all right! Say, now, I don't want to dictate to no one," declared the Sheriff, "but, draw fire or not, we've got to get a lamp to find this fellow; we've got to take our risks so as to arrest him. Waal, taking risks is in our line; we expected that when we were elected. I'll chance it."

Jim and Dan instantly agreed to do likewise.

"There's a motor-car over here," said the former at once, beginning to walk towards it. "We can remove the lamps and use those. I don't say, Mr. Sheriff, that you're not right. This is a job which means risk, and, as you say, it's your duty to get into danger. Our job is to help you, like every honest citizen will want to do. Come on, Dan, and let us see what we can make of the lamps, for the sooner we follow that beggar the better."

It chanced that the motor-car standing not far off was equipped with acetylene head-lights, being dissimilar in that respect to the majority of modern automobiles in America, and promptly they removed these lamps and brought them back to the party. Presently they had them alight, and, taking one and sending the second along to the next party, who were watching the nearest opening, they plunged boldly into the gallery which led to the inner workings, one man carrying the lamp and the rest grouped about him, the Sheriff and half a dozen of them bearing revolvers, while not a few carried guns which they had hurriedly snatched from their lodgings.

Pushing on with great caution, and flashing the lamp hither and thither, so as to expose the openings to works which led off from this main gallery, the party had presently proceeded some three hundred yards, and had as yet discovered no trace of the fugitive. Then one of them gave vent to a cry, and, bending down, picked up an object.

"The hat he was wearing, I could swear," he said, lifting it. "Let's put it in front of the light. See, Mr. Sheriff, I was in the saloon there with Bill Harkness, a-talkin' about this here declaration of war that the President's made, with one eye on Harkness, as you might say, and one on the chap leanin' up against the counter. This is his hat—I'd put me boots on it."

He raised the hat till the full stream of light from the lamp fell upon it, so that all could examine it. As he lowered it again, and the beams swept on into the depths of the tunnel, there suddenly came a deafening report; the lamp went out as if drowned in water, while the man carrying it fell to the ground with a crash.

"Pick him up," said the Sheriff. "Jim Carpenter, you were right. Did any of you folks catch a sight of the varmint?"

Not one answered. As a matter of fact, the man who had fired the shot had been secreted round a corner, and, at the moment he stretched forth one arm with his weapon, the party in search of him were examining the hat which he had dropped, and which was sure evidence of the fact that he had taken refuge in these workings. A second later he had dived back round the corner, and now the whole place was in darkness.

"We had best get out," said the Sheriff in low tones. "I ain't the one to be driven off by a murderer. But Jim's right, and every time we come in bearing a lamp that fellow's open to get us. He's a shot, too, for else he wouldn't 'a got his bullet in so straight. Let's get back and 'tend to our mate."

Feeling their way along the walls, they staggered back to the exit, and were presently once more in the open, where, to the relief of all, they discovered that the man they carried had been merely stunned. For he had held the lamp at arm's length and just level with his head, and the bullet which had struck it had flung it back violently against his head and so stunned him.

"And what next?" the Sheriff asked as the party gathered in a group and looked at one another enquiringly. "Young Jim Carpenter, you've been these many years in and around the works, what 'ud you do? Mebbe you can find your way round blindfold."

Jim thought the matter over for a while. It was true that he could find his way anywhere in those works blindfold, or without a lamp, and indeed would have been a dunce could he not have done so, seeing that he habitually went to his work along the galleries without a light, every inch being familiar to him. Yet to find one's road in the workings within the mountain and to search for a murderer therein were two entirely different propositions. The one required no nerve, hardly any effort; the other called for something more, and promised at the least excitement and adventure.

"Guess, Mr. Sheriff," he said at last, "it's the duty of every one of us to lend a hand."

"I can't compel," came the answer. "Me and my posse were elected to look after the rights of people in this here city and surroundings, to arrest thieves and vagabonds, and to maintain order. If we are hard pressed we are entitled to call upon those nearest, but they ain't compelled to join; they are free citizens. Folks in this country are free, young Jim Carpenter."

He eyed the young fellow critically, peering at him closely from the top of his peaked hat to the soles of his sturdy mining boots, noticing the breadth of his shoulders, the depth of his chest, his firm face with the pair of glittering, frank eyes looking out from it, the strong hands and arms, bared

almost to the shoulder, and the general air of strength and resolution about this young miner.

"Should say as he and Dan are just the last to refuse a request that might plunge 'em into danger," he was thinking. "They're quiet, hard-working folks, as we all know, and orphans this many a year, having earned their own grub and a good deal more, and have been independent of others. Waal?" he asked bluntly.

"I've been thinking, that's all," said Jim. "It don't do to go in for a thing like this without some sort of consideration. Any way you look at it it's not an easy job; for I take it this German chap is bottled up in the mountain and has to be hunted out of any corner or hollow in which he's taken shelter. You might board up the entrances and starve him out, only the chances are there's food enough in the workings to keep him alive for quite a while; for the miners often take in a store so as to free them from the job of carrying food up every day. As to water, there's pools of it; so, as you might say, a siege like this could last for days on end, and the murderer fail to be captured. So the best and quickest way is to go in and pull him out; and bearing a lamp, as we have just now tried, ain't successful."

"Just as you warned us, I'll own," the Sheriff admitted. "Now then?"

"I'd take in a small party only," Jim said, "every one of 'em armed and good shots, and one of 'em carrying an electric torch. I'd let 'em wear rubber boots, and would warn 'em not even to whisper. They could arrange signals before they went in: a tug at the coat to warn each other that one of 'em had heard a suspicious sound. I'd let 'em creep forward till near their man, and then the one with the lamp could flash it on, while the others covered the fellow with their revolvers."

"Gee," shouted the Sheriff, "that's some talking!—some sense! Let's think it over. But what about a guide? Who'd lead 'em? Who's the chap who's a-goin' to take hold o' the torch? It means shootin', mind. That there skunk what's got inside could shoot the eye out of a horse, I reckon, so that those who go in after him will have to look mighty lively—so who's a-goin'?"

"That's settled," Jim said abruptly. "That is, of course, if you think I'll do."

"And I'll go along with him," Dan immediately chimed in. "Only we shall want someone who can shoot well: Jim and me's used a gun (revolver) at times, but we ain't no experts; but Larry, here, he's the man. If the chap who shot Charlie over the bar, and put our light out a while ago, could hit the eye out of a horse, Larry'ud shoot one out of a fly, I guess."

"Huh!" grunted the Sheriff, and cast a sharp glance at the individual in whose direction Dan had jerked a thumb. There he saw quite a diminutive person, yet looking rather terrific in his mining costume. For what with his high brown boots with their thick soles and the lacings which ran almost from the toe right up to the knee, his rough trousers cut too big for him, and a somewhat broad hat tilted right on the back of his head, to say nothing of fierce moustaches, Larry looked a terrible fellow.

Yet those who knew him knew him as a smiling, happy-go-lucky individual, a miner whose chief characteristic was a penchant for spending money. Dollars fled through the unfortunate Larry's pockets as if the latter were full of holes. He was always in an impecunious position; and yet Larry had pride, for not once did he beg of his comrades. For the rest, it was on quiet half-holidays that he and a few others would betake themselves to some retreat down at the foot of the mountain, and there practise with their revolvers.

"You ain't got no cause to take on," Larry had told Jim many a time when the latter had missed a can tossed in the air, for that was his particular test applied to all who desired to become marksmen. "See here, young fellow, I tosses the can into the air, and you has your back turned to it. I says 'Go!' and round you swings, up yer arm goes, and then the gun speaks. It ain't done by aimin', it comes natural. You can't hit a can, same as that, tossed in the air, unless you've spent dollars in ammunition same as I've done. There ain't no particular difficulty in it, it's just persistence and practice—just stickin' to it. So there, and that's all there is to it."

It might be easy enough for the diminutive Larry, but it caused him no end of amusement to see the obstinate way in which Jim and others tackled the proposition, and to watch their many failures; although, to do this jovial fellow but justice, it caused him to shout with delight when finally they

were able to hit the flying object. Yet, with all their practice, not one came up to the redoubtable Larry.

"Yep, Sheriff," he grinned, as the latter pointed a finger at him, "I'll own up to it. It ain't that I'm of a quarrelsome sort of a disposition."

At that they all grinned.

"What's that?" demanded Larry, firing up, not understanding their humour. "Me quarrelsome! Why, I've been here about the mines this six years past and there ain't one with whom I've had a ruction."

That again was substantial truth; yet we must amplify it a little by the statement that the population working round this huge copper-mine was constantly fluctuating, and only a small proportion of the men remained there for many months together. Yet in such a community men soon gather knowledge of one another, and, though there were brawls now and again, though men came to the mine who were of a distinctly cantankerous and quarrelsome disposition, it was significant that, learning early of Larry's prowess with a gun, it was not with this diminutive little miner that they picked their quarrels.

Larry grinned widely, for now he saw that his friends were merely bantering.

"I kin git you," he laughed. "Waal, Mr. Sheriff, let's move on. I've a gun here handy," and he tapped the holster in which his revolver was resting.

"But there's the torch to be got first of all," Jim reminded them, "and then there are rubber boots or shoes. They are of as much importance almost as our friend Larry. What's the odds, Mr. Sheriff, if we set our guards at the exits from the mountain, and send down below to get all we want? I ain't the one to delay, but we are more likely to succeed if we make our preparations carefully."

There came a commotion away on their left as he was speaking: a weapon snapped sharply, there was a rush of men towards the entrance, which, like the one in front of which Jim and his friends were standing, was being watched and guarded, and then one of the Sheriff's posse approached.

"The varmint tried to make out, Mr. Sheriff," he reported. "We was there a-talkin' away and watchin' the entrance, when a man comes slinkin' along out o' the darkness, peers out at us, and lifts his revolver. It was Jacques what took a pot shot at him, and I see'd the bullet splash on the rock by his head, and our chap turned and went off like greased lightning."

The Sheriff at once went to the telephone hut near at hand and called up the parties at the other exits and warned them to be on their guard.

"You'd best get some sort of cover," he told them, "so that if the fellow tries to break out he won't have a clear shot at you. Me and my mates here are going in to search for him, and just before we move off I'll send another 'phone message to you. Keep a bright look-out."

It was perhaps half an hour later that the messenger, whom they had dispatched to the bottom of the mountain by means of one of the mine locomotives, came back on the foot-board of that same wagon bearing sundry pairs of rubber-soled shoes with him and a couple of electric torches, also he carried a basket of food and a couple of water-bottles.

"Seems to me, boss," he said, addressing the Sheriff, "that you folks might be some while in the mountain; it ain't altogether a small place, now, is it? And ef you get on the tracks of this here chap what's murdered Charlie, you won't be askin' to come back just to get a bite of food or a drink of water. You'll want to trace him and perhaps drive him out to one of the watching-parties. Ef that's so, it occurred to me that some meat and bread and a couple of cans of cold tea would meet your ticket, and here they are. Now I'm a-goin' to put on one o' these pairs of shoes, for I'm one o' the party."

It took quite an amount of argument to settle who were to go and who were to stay behind to watch the entrance into which Jim and his friends were to penetrate. Naturally enough the Sheriff must be one of the little adventurous band, and Larry was an indispensable. Jim, too, must go, for he was to guide them; and Dan would be there to assist him if need be, or to replace him in case he became a casualty. But the remainder clamoured to accompany them; and it took not a little persuasion and tactful chatter on the part of the Sheriff to pick his men and to decide who should be of the party.

"It stands to reason, boys," he said, "that we are all doing our duty whether we go in or stay out here. You've seen for yourselves that this here chap we're after won't stand at anything: if he comes into the open he's as likely to shoot at you as he will at us who are goin' in after him, only, of course, I admit it's slower work stayin' out here. Guess you've put me up as Sheriff so as I should be able to talk when times like these come round."

"You bet!" they admitted, nodding their heads.

"Then I'm goin' to give orders right off. Larry and Jim and Dan and me, and Jacques there, and Tom Curtis will make the investigating-party; t'others waits here and takes cover under boulders. Our friend Tim, what's been round the mines these many years, will take charge of the lot of you, and will post a man at the 'phone ready to call up the other parties. This here young fellow, Harry Dance, will follow us in five minutes after we've started, and when he's gone for five minutes, this here Tim will make in after him, and ef we are longer still, and moving up, Frank Stebbins will take the track into the mine so as to keep in contact. It will be a sort of relay business. Ef we get held up, the message can be passed back, and ef we want help some of you can come in after us. Only mind, there's always got to be a guard standing here in case the fellow doubles; for you've got to remember that in the workings in there there are burrows in all directions, and a man can leave the main gallery and turn and twist and come back on his tracks and easily avoid a search-party."

Donning the rubber shoes which had been brought for them, and each of them tucking a portion of bread and meat into his pockets, while Dan and the Sheriff shouldered the cans of tea, the party saw to their weapons. Jim made sure that the electric torch he carried was in working order, and thrust the reserve one in his pocket. Then, at a nod from the Sheriff, and a cheery "Good luck!" from the party who were to remain behind, and who watched their departure ruefully, Jim led the way into the mine, and presently he and his friends were swallowed up by the darkness.

CHAPTER III
In the Mine Shafts

There was dense opaqueness within the bosom of the gigantic mountain which the industry of man in Utah has honeycombed with passages, and once the search-party, with Jim at the head, had gained some distance from the exit and had turned abruptly to their left, thereby cutting themselves off, as it were, from the few stray rays of daylight which filtered in through the arched entrance, the darkness seemed to become accentuated, while the silence was positively startling.

"Stop!"

Jim touched the Sheriff on the sleeve, and the latter signalled to the next man behind him, and so they all came to a halt. There they stood listening for three or four minutes.

"Pat-a-pat! pat-a-pat!" they heard, and then a deep splash. "Pat-a-pat! pat-a-pat!" once more, and then a bubbling sound, only to give way to that same refrain: "Pat-a-pat! pat-a-pat!"

"It's——!" gasped the Sheriff, for he was an open-air man, a farmer in the neighbourhood, and these inner workings rather tended to overawe him. "What is it?" he whispered.

"Water falling from the roof into a pool; there's lots of it," Jim told him, *sotto voce*. "Come along!"

Once more they were threading their way onward, each man with his left hand outstretched, feeling the damp, roughly-hewn side of the tunnel, while with his other hand he held the tail of the coat of the comrade in front of him. As for Jim, he gripped the electric torch in his right hand, ready at any moment to switch the light on and project the beams in any direction. A hundred, two hundred yards they gained, five hundred yards, without having heard a single sound to disturb them, save occasionally that pat-a-pat, the often tuneful dripping of water from the roof into some rocky pool

beneath, water through which their feet splashed when they came to it. Then of a sudden a rumbling roar smote upon their ears, advanced swiftly towards them, met them, as it were, and then, racing past their ears, went on along the dark gallery, and so towards the open, bringing the party to a halt.

"A shot," Jim whispered. "That fellow's fired his gun somewhere on beyond us, and a goodish way, I'd say, for the gallery carries sound like a speaking-tube, and you can hear a man shout, for instance, more than a quarter of a mile away. Let's move forward faster."

"Get in at it," the Sheriff answered.

And then they were moving again, on through the darkness, stumbling over rough tram-lines, through pools of water, over fallen boulders, round acute corners, and so on and on, while behind them first one and then others of the party they had left at the entrance crept in, forming that communicating chain which the Sheriff had so thoughtfully ordered.

"H—hush!" The Sheriff's bony fingers gripped Jim's arm, and, unmindful of the fact that darkness surrounded them, he stretched forth his other hand and pointed into the void in front. "The varmint's there," he whispered hoarsely. "I heard him move. Listen!"

Yes, something or someone was moving. Whether in the near distance or far it was impossible to state definitely, though every member of the search-party stretched his ears to the fullest extent and listened eagerly, head forward, horny palm making a funnel in the endeavour to catch more sound waves, and so to unfathom what was then a mystery.

"Pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat!" went those lugubrious drops into the pools of water underfoot, "pit-a-pat!" they tumbled from the arched roof of the gallery on to the persons of that listening search-party, while water streamed down the rough-hewn sides and dribbled over the fingers which they had placed there to guide them.

Yes, someone moved.

"Farther along," Jim hardly whispered, tugging at the Sheriff's coat. "Let Larry come along!"

The giant form of the Sheriff unbent a little when he turned, stretched out a hand and gripped that youth by the shoulder.

"I heard," came a whisper. "I've got me gun, and all's well. You get in, Jim, I'm following."

The party they left heard them stumbling along, their feet making mysterious sounds as they splashed along the floor of the tunnel, and then of a sudden the blackness in front of them was illuminated by one piercing beam which cut its way through the darkness, its edges brilliant, its centre blurred. That beam hit upon the dripping side of the tunnel some yards ahead, painted a brilliant circle on it, hovered to one side, then flicked back, and later showed in its very centre the figure of a man bent almost double crouching beside the wall, a metal object on one knee gripped by one hand, an object which reflected the beam brightly.

"It's——" shouted the Sheriff, and then a sharp crack from a revolver drowned his voice and stunned the ears of all present. They saw the flash of the weapon, and a moment later watched as the crouching figure darted along the side of the tunnel, and swept round a corner, while a second shot, a second reverberation, wakened the echoes, and a bullet flicked a piece out of the edge of rock round which that crouching figure had doubled.

"Come on," shouted Jim, while Larry beat himself on the breast, vexed that he should have missed such a shot.

"It's the light," he cried angrily, "it put me out; I wasn't expecting it. Seems to me I'd better have a torch, too. Here! hand one over, Jim, then I shall know when to put it on and be ready."

For five minutes or more they struggled on, running at times, and then halting to listen. Finally Larry clapped a wet and perspiring hand on Jim's shoulder.

"Gee!" he said; "it ain't no good, this here runnin' up and down like rabbits. Every time we moves the fellow hears us. This party's too big. Let's divide, or, better still, supposin' we post sentries who will block the tunnel. You see the skunk we're after is mebbe bolting round and round in a circle."

"That's true," Jim assured him. "There are burrows leading in all directions here, and it's not at all difficult to miss anyone."

"Particularly if you're anxious to avoid a meeting, same as this white-livered German," grunted the Sheriff, who was panting after his exertions.

"And you've got to remember," said Larry, "that every time we moves he hears us. Listen! There, didn't I say so? That's the varmint we're after, and mebbe he's two or three hundred yards away, yet you can hear his feet splash in a pool of water."

There echoed along the wet walls of the gallery the sound of a distant splash, and then there was silence for a few moments, broken again by the clatter of someone's heel against a piece of rock.

"Same as he hears us," growled the Sheriff. "Larry's right, and we've got to break up this party. Well then——?"

He plucked at Jim's shoulder, and the latter at once responded.

"Larry and Dan and I will go on," he said abruptly. "You, Mr. Sheriff, and the others had best divide into two—half here and half farther back. That may trap the fellow we're after. Meanwhile we three who are going on can crawl very carefully and slowly beside the wall of the gallery and halt after a while. If we hear our man we will try and get nearer, but our main object will be to get him to move nearer to us, then we'll have our lights on him in a moment."

"Not forgettin' guns," laughed Larry, "not forgettin' this here, this shooter! It's just horse sense that, Mr. Sheriff. Jim's been long enough in the mine to know his way about, and he's listened hours and hours, same as me, and knows what it is to hear a man a-comin'. When he sits down and listens to you movin' along to him, and it's a case of shootin' between two people, it's the man who sits tight and does the listening has all the chances. Shucks! Jim's given us an idea what's worth followin'."

It took but very little time to make their preparations, when Jim and Dan and Larry again crept away, this time at a much slower pace, halting when they had proceeded some two hundred yards. Here they were at a point

where a smaller gallery left the main one, and ensconcing themselves at the entrance they lay down and listened.

"Seems to me as the skunk's got right away," said Larry, his patience nearly exhausted when they had lain there nearly half an hour and not a sound had reached their ears, save those made by their distant friends who were patrolling the main gallery, "suppose——"

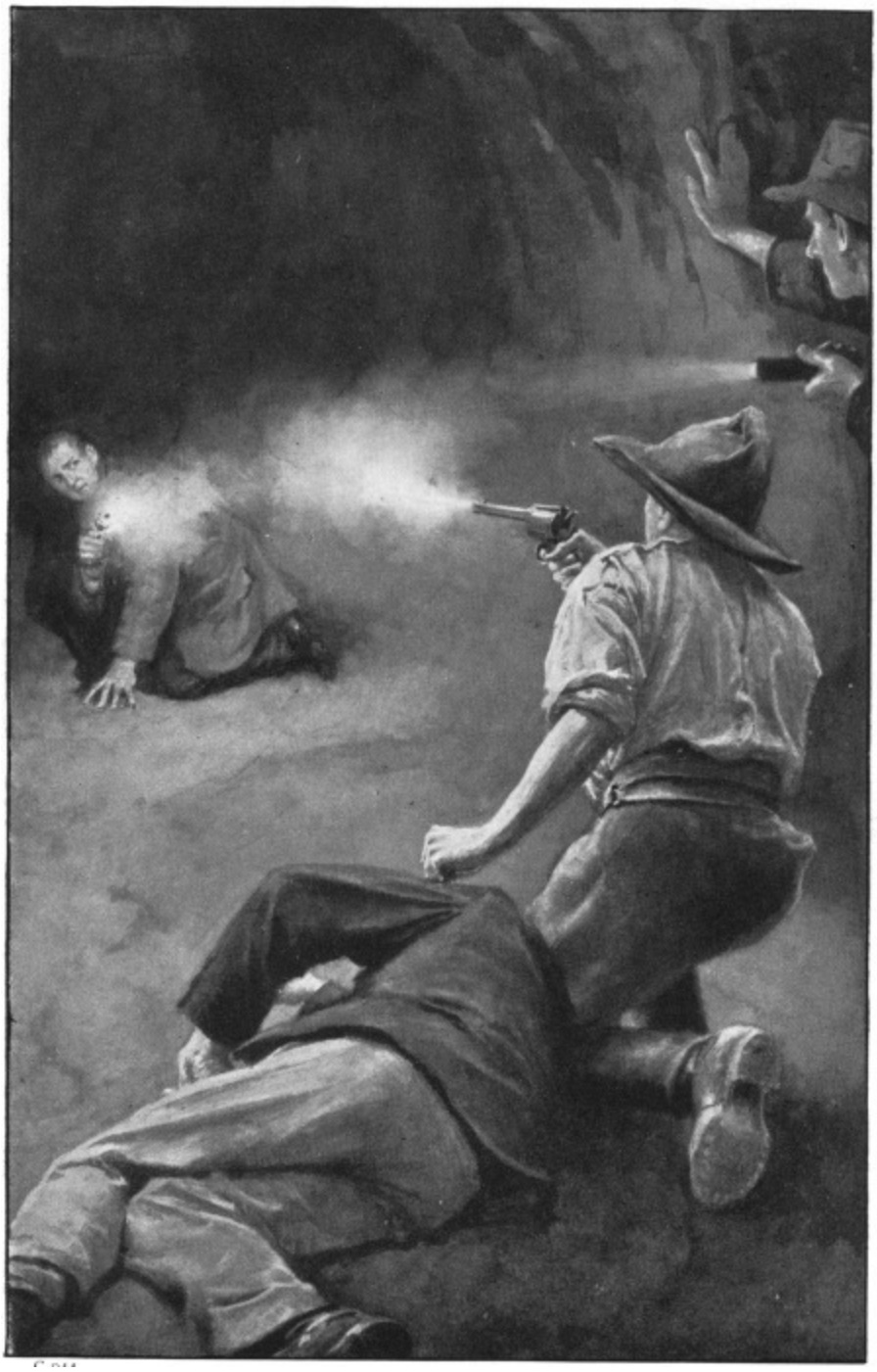
Dan gripped him by the shoulder.

"H—h—ush!" he whispered.

Jim pushed his torch forward and made ready.

"Aye!" grunted Larry, and then there was a faint click as he prepared his revolver.

"Wait!" Someone was coming toward them. A sound of stealthy footsteps reached their ears, though whether coming from the left or the right was at that moment uncertain. Peering in both directions, the three lay there with bated breath, endeavouring to remain cool and yet almost trembling with suppressed excitement. Then, of a sudden, the sound of a splash only a few yards away arrested their attention, and caused them to start to their knees. An instant later their two torches cast beams into the gallery, and centred themselves with a flash upon an individual creeping along some twenty yards from them. It was the German without a doubt, hatless, dishevelled, sopping wet, and bearing a haunted, hunted expression. He blinked as the light fell full in his face, and then snatched at a weapon which he held concealed in a pocket. At the same moment Larry's pistol spoke, and with a howl the man dropped his left arm helpless beside him. But a moment later a flame flashed from beneath his coat, and one of the three fell with a dull thud on to the wet ground which floored the tunnel, his fall pushing Larry aside and upsetting his aim so that his second bullet went wide of the mark. A moment later the man was gone, and could be heard scuttling along into the distance.



ONE OF THE THREE FELL WITH A DULL THUD

"Show a light," said Jim hoarsely, as he bent over Dan's prostrate figure; "where's he hit, Larry? Ah!—look!"

Beneath the wide-open shirt which Dan wore there was a splash of colour extending over his broad chest, a splash of red running down beneath the cotton. The young fellow's eyes were closed, his face, brilliant in the rays of the electric torch, was desperately pale, while he seemed to have ceased breathing.

"Hard hit!" said Larry. "If I don't rip the heart of that darned German! And next time I don't shoot only to wound, to make him helpless, same as I did this time, I shoot to kill, Jim, shoot to exterminate the varmint."

They debated for a while what they would do, and then whistled for the Sheriff and his party to join them.

"It's a bad do!" the latter said when he came up and looked at Dan, bending over him and feeling his pulse and then counting his breathing. "Hard hit, as you say, Larry, but he's young and strong and ain't taken to liquor; if anyone can pull through it's Dan. Only, he's got to get every chance, which means that the sooner we've got him out of here the better. Let's carry him, boys; later on we'll hunt out this German."

"Later on?" said Jim, who had now recovered a little from the shock which Dan's condition had caused him. "No, Mr. Sheriff, I'm going on at once, there's no time to be lost, for when it gets dark a fellow's chance for creeping out of the mine will be enormously improved. I'm going to hunt him down and either shoot or capture him, which it don't matter."

"Same here," declared Larry, "same here, Mr. Sheriff; now's the time, as Jim says. We've winged our man, and chances are he's bled quite a heap and will be weak like and more easily taken. If we wait till to-morrow he may have got away or got his arm tied up, and be in better shape to meet us. Now's the time. You pull out, Mr. Sheriff, with Dan, for the boy's life depends on it; me and Jim's goin' forward."

They parted, the Sheriff and his men to pick Dan up with every care and bear him along as gently as they could to the entrance; there he was put in a car and hurried down to the mining hospital below, where, in case of casualties occurring, the surgeon was already in attendance.

"Hum!" he said; "a close call, Mr. Sheriff. I don't know! I don't know! Indeed," he continued, shaking his head as he bent over Dan's almost

lifeless figure and put his stethoscope to his chest, "slick through—small-calibre bullet, and not over-much bleeding. Missed the heart by two or three inches, which is lucky. Well, it might have been worse, Mr. Sheriff, it might have caught him right through the heart, or that bullet might have lodged in his lung and set up no end of trouble in the future. If he lives for a few days, he will pull round. You and your men get off now and leave Dan to me and the nurses; but——" he shook his head again, "but, Mr. Sheriff, don't count on anything wonderful."

Meanwhile, Jim and Larry had pushed on resolutely into the darkness of the tunnel.

"Hold hard!" said Jim after a while, when they had crawled some distance and had listened on many occasions, only to hear nothing which told them of the near presence of the man they were seeking.

To be sure, there came to their ears the steady dripping of water as it splashed into the inky-black pools on the floor of the tunnel, and now and again a distant echo which reverberated gently along the whole length of the gallery.

"It's the Sheriff talking in that big voice of his to the men in the opening," Larry explained. "This here tunnel's like a speaking-tube. Well, what is it, Jim?"

"I've been thinking. This is like hunting for a needle in a bundle of hay. We've nothing to go on, Larry, except sounds, and they're uncertain; it seems to me that we must pursue a different course."

"A different course?" asked his companion, a little astonished. "How? which way?"

"I don't mean in direction; I mean course of action. See here," said Jim, "you've winged the German."

"Winged!" said Larry, his tones now those of disgust. "If I was worth a cent with a gun I'd have drilled a hole clean through him. I could 'a done, Jim. Ef you was to put up a dollar at ten paces distant, end ways on, I'd hit it slick ten times out of ten, and I ain't boastin' now——" he ended, with a low hiss of annoyance.

"Everyone knows what you can do, Larry," Jim told him. For indeed Larry's prowess with a revolver was known throughout the mine.

"If you couldn't shoot straight you wouldn't have been able to hit his arm; for you've told us you meant only to wound him. Of course I understand that you wish now that you'd killed him, for then Dan might not have fallen, but you've winged him and probably he's bleeding. Perhaps if we use our torches, we shall be able to follow a trail if by chance he's left one."

The suggestion cannot be described as one of any brilliance, for indeed it was so very obvious; yet in the excitement of the chase it had not occurred to either of them before, and now the prospect it offered caused Larry to grip Jim by the shoulder eagerly.

"It's it! Gee," he whispered excitedly, "ef it don't offer the only chance! And then?"

"And then," said Jim, "if we get on his trail we shoot off our lights and go forward say twenty yards and pick it up again. In that way, sooner or later, we may get him cornered. He'll shoot."

"Aye, he'll shoot," agreed Larry, "and we'll chance that, Jim. Only, if the chance comes, you can lay it that we'll flatten out our man with one of these bullets. Pity you ain't armed, Jim, you ought to 'a had a gun along with you; but you ain't fearful."

"Fearful! Let's move on. Now search the ground with your light."

It was not until ten minutes or more had passed that the two as they crept along the floor of the gallery came upon a patch brighter than that they had been traversing, and here on the wall, about three feet from the floor, there was the impression of a hand—a blood-stained impression. For the outline of the fingers and the palm of a man's hand were imprinted upon the stone in a brilliant red—sure sign that the German had gone in that direction.

"And here's his boot-mark in the mud at the foot of the wall," said Larry, pointing it out to Jim, "and right here's another and another. He was going along this way. See, here, Jim," he whispered, putting his lips close to the ear of the young fellow who was his companion, "ef it was me alone as was leading this expedition, I'd turn off me light here and get ready with the

feet. I'd move along quick, say a hundred yards or more, and then lie low and listen."

"Same as I was going to suggest," Jim answered. "Come on, let's hold hands so that we don't get separated; and after this, not a word, not a sound!"

Hurrying forward, they stopped again when they thought they had covered the distance agreed upon, and then sat down with their backs against the wall of the gallery, listening and waiting. It was some ten minutes later that the faintest whisper of a sound was heard, a whisper which appeared to be approaching them, although that was a matter for conjecture. They listened intently till both were certain that someone was approaching them, though whether in the gallery in which they themselves were waiting, or in some other of the numerous burrows which honeycombed the mountain, was a matter they could only guess at. Then, of a sudden, they became aware of the fact that whoever gave rise to the sound was very near them. Almost instantly they switched on their lights, and just as rapidly one of them went out, while at the same moment Larry gave vent to a shrill exclamation, and a flash of flame on the far side of the gallery and a loud report accompanied the cry he gave.

When Jim contrived to turn his own torch on the point where the flame of a pistol-shot had illuminated the darkness, the tunnel was bare, there was not a sign of anyone, though rapidly moving away were the sounds of retreating footsteps. By his side lay Larry, groaning and muttering and growling.

"Guess that there fox has managed to do us in again," he managed to tell Jim. "You lay hold o' me, young fellow, and carry me under yer arm. I'm only a small bit of a chap, and of no great account, but, Gee, if I get hold o' that chap! If I ever gets square face to face o' that feller!"

It was indeed a sorry finish to what might have been quite an exhilarating affair. Undoubtedly the German had got the better of the bargain. In some uncanny manner, indeed, he had contrived to hoodwink all his pursuers, and late that night was clever enough to slip out of one of the exits and escape from the mountain. All that could be heard of him after that was that he had managed to reach the Pacific coast, and had taken ship no doubt for Germany. One clue he left: a photograph of himself, which was found in his

lodgings. Below the portrait the man's signature was scrawled in a calligraphy decorated with many flourishes.

"Perhaps we'll see him over t'other side," said Larry, a few days later. "Guess we'll find no difficulty in recognizing that ugly mug wherever we come across it."

"And I just hope that happy meeting 'll come along pretty quick," agreed Jim. "As soon as you are fit to move we'll get off there and make tracks."

"Aye, aye, make tracks!" cried Larry, for they had talked the matter over and decided to leave for France at the very first opportunity. "Our chaps will be trained over this side," Larry had said, "but that's too slow a job for me. Reckon a man as can shoot same as I can, and same as you, will be useful over yonder. Pity Dan can't come."

Dan couldn't, and indeed would hardly be fitted for the duties of a soldier for many months to come, for the German's bullet had wounded him severely. But his place was taken almost at once by English Bill, a mere stripling.

"Son o' Charlie, down in the saloon in the camp," he told Jim. "You see, mother's an English-born woman; father came over here seven years ago, leaving me and mother to follow. I've been here just a year."

"Just a year!" repeated Larry, looking the stripling over. "And what may be your age, young feller? Yer size and yer cheek, don't yer know, make yer out to be a good twenty; yer face, and what-not, says that yer barely eighteen."

"Seventeen this last fall—old enough to come along o' you and do something to them Germans," came the quick answer. "I can shoot, too, Larry. You ain't the only one that knows how to hold a gun. Father taught me. Besides, didn't this low-down hound murder him? Wasn't he a German agent? Hasn't England been fighting Germany this last three years? What's the good of me here then? I've something to do in France, same as you have. I'll come right along."

And come right along English Bill did, stripling though he was, and made quite an excellent companion for Jim and Larry. Indeed the three of them

were to meet with many adventures before they reached France itself, and there, with British and French and American troops round them, were to see quite a deal of fighting.

CHAPTER IV
"En Route" for Europe

It was three weeks after the affair of the copper mine and the runaway German, and of the murder of Charlie by this unscrupulous agent of the Kaiser, that Jim and Larry and the juvenile English Bill—William John Harkness—made definite plans for their departure.

"Yer see," said Larry, as he stood, hands thrust deep into the capacious pockets of his trousers, his head tilted forward, and his cap over his brows, "yer see, young feller, it ain't been possible before to get a move on. There's been—there's been things to do," he said rather lamely, a little diffidently.

"Huh!" Jim merely nodded and looked a little askance at Bill, who, like many a youngster, coloured as his deeper feelings were stirred.

"Yep," he blurted out a minute later, though the two of them saw him gulp. "Yep," he repeated, aping the speech of Larry; for Larry and Jim seemed to this young English lad personalities to be envied, admired, and copied. "There's been things! The burial of Father, for instance, the winding up of affairs."

"Aye," grunted Larry, "the winding up of affairs, and yours have been important, Bill."

Jim nodded, and again the young fellow beside them flushed. Indeed, the winding up of his personal affairs had been to him, if not to the others, quite a big concern, which, coming very fortunately for him immediately after the death and burial of a father whom he admired and respected and cared for deeply, had helped to distract his grief from the loss he had suffered.

Curiously enough, it turned out that Charlie, the bar tender, was by no means bereft of this world's goods. It should be noted that bar tending in America is a highly-thought-of occupation, controlled by its own particular Union, demanding high wages, and the best of surroundings and conditions. Add to this that Charlie, popular with all with whom he came in contact,

was a man possessed of no small intellect, and one can gather good reasons for his becoming affluent.

"A man can work quite contented at what seems a subordinate job, young Will," he told his only son soon after he had joined him from England. "I don't mind saying I could give up this work to-morrow if need be, and live perhaps at ease like what's sometimes called a 'gentleman' back in England. But I ain't the one for living at ease. Work's what I like, and plenty of it, so long as it's congenial; and here it's that all the time. And mark you this, lad, I'm a teetotaller, though I do serve drinks over a bar, often enough to rude miners. But I was sayin', a chap don't need to leave his work if he likes it, and working behind a bar don't prevent me from making a way in other directions. There's mining shares to be bought by the chap that's saved; and I've bought 'em. If yer mother had lived, she could have gone back to England and aped the lady. There's been ranch shares to buy, and them too I've taken a liking to, and done well with 'em. Think it out, me boy, a man thrifty and careful, and who works steadily most every day and most hours of the day, will have dollars to spare to put into work that other men are doing; and so it goes on till one day he turns round and finds that he's got quite a tidy sum tucked away to cover the time when he's too old for working."

It was that "tidy sum" that Larry referred to when he said that English Bill had had "affairs" to clear up, and it was those "affairs" and the attorney to whom Jim introduced him that distracted Bill's attention from the loss he had suffered, taking his mind from the gruesome act of that rascally German and forcing him to concentrate on other more humane affairs. Now everything was cleared up, the estate of the murdered Charles was either sold already or being sold, the money was banked, and there was no longer any need for Bill to be in attendance. As for Jim, he was satisfied that Dan was progressing, slowly, perhaps, but surely.

"Though he won't be fit for months yet," the doctor told him. "As it is, he's had as narrow an escape as you could imagine, and it'll be months before he's able to run about, which means that it will be months before he finds his way to France to take part in smashing that villain of a Kaiser. Aye, villain!" he cried, bringing a fist down with a bang on the edge of the operating-table. "D'you think we over here don't know? Haven't I friends,

American doctors, that have been over in England these months past, who joined up to help the British Medical Service? Haven't they been in France? Aren't there friends of mine who have been working for months in the French hospitals? And what's their tale?"

If Jim had waited to hear the whole tale—for the doctor was notoriously garrulous—he would have heard much that he had already read, and would certainly have gathered some new information: news of shattered villages, of smashed châteaux, of a country ravaged wherever the Hun could reach it, of the Cathedral of Reims levelled almost, of poisoned gas projected at French and British, of dastardly acts in all directions, of the bombing of towns and villages, and the slaughtering of women and innocents. But Jim knew a lot about it himself. It had not required the dastardly act of that German who murdered Charlie to rouse him to a state of indignation, to make him swear to leave for France at the earliest possible opportunity. He had read of the ravaging of Belgium; he too knew something of the diabolical acts of the Germans to their British and French prisoners. Besides, it did not want a very wise man to realize that the German was no ordinary combatant. He had not hesitated to break every rule of warfare. Was not one of his infractions of the general usages his new, widely proclaimed intention to torpedo and submarine every ship afloat, whether it carried women and children, or whether only merchandise?

Jim knew his own mind, like thousands and thousands of other Americans. He had only waited the word of the President of the United States. That word was spoken, and nothing now could hold him back, after the personal experience he had so recently met with.

"Guess we can board the train to-morrow," said Larry, pushing his head a little farther forward and looking at Bill in such a truculent way that one would have thought that he meant to be pugnacious.

"Yep—the 5.45 out," came the answer. "Bags packed; got some dollars in my pocket, with a draft on a bank at Noo York."

"And then?" asked Jim, for, though the three had made up their minds to leave for France together, they had not yet discussed the details of their journey. It didn't seem to matter, in fact, so long as they did reach France, and at the earliest possible moment.

"And then?"

"Oh, and then? Yep," said Larry, opening his lips, shutting his eyes, and then grinning inanely at the two of them.

"Yep," he repeated, and looked hard at Jim.

"Yep," said Bill, looking in the same direction.

"And then—oh!—and then," said Jim, scratching his head, "well, let's get there," he added in the most practical voice. "The train will take us there without any bother, and once on the spot we'll be nearer the coast—on the water, as you might say—and could really get a move on about sailing."

See them then on the cars *en route* from Salt Lake City, via the Canyon, to New York, where, in the course of four days, they put in an appearance.

"First thing is to fix up quarters," said Larry as he jingled a few cents in his pockets. "Time was when I come to Noo York and gone to the best hotel. That was in good times, Jim, when I was out for a holiday and didn't mind spending. But this is business; we're on a different jaunt altogether now. Say now, we'll make right down for the docks."

Taking their "grips" (hand-bags) with them—for, like many an American, the three travelled very light, and (porters not being in evidence at the stations as they are in England) were therefore not in any difficulty—they found their way to the cars (tram-cars) which plough in all directions through the old and new portions of this premier city of America, where once the Dutch held play, and where in their turn the British dispossessed them. Presently they were down in the docking area, with warehouses about them, the masts of huge ships projecting into the air—amongst them not a few which were German. Larry jerked a somewhat dirty thumb in that direction.

"There's the *Vaterland* and what-not yonder," he grinned. "Ships nigh thirty or more thousand tons, what the Kaiser built to beat creation on the water. Guess they'll be American soon, if they ain't already."

"Not yet," replied the critical Jim, "though in effect they do belong to the country. I was reading in the news last night that Uncle Sam has put a guard

upon each of the ships belonging to Germany, and that the crews which have lived on them all these months since the war began in Europe have been sent ashore. Pity is that in the meanwhile they've damaged the engines, though our workmen will soon make that good. And—who knows?—in a few months' time they'll be taking American soldiers to France to teach the Kaiser his lesson."

To Larry and Jim the sights they saw all along the waterside were novel, for, though Larry had been to New York before, and indeed had travelled quite a considerable amount in America, the water-side had never attracted him, but now that he was likely to embark for France, ships and all that passed on the ocean were a source of interest to him. To English Bill—young Bill as they sometimes called him—the sight was a common one.

"There'll be ships and ships going across," he told his two companions. "Store-ships filled with food, some for the Belgians, who are nigh starving, other store-ships with food for Britain, because, you see, being an island with a big population, she cannot very well feed them all. Besides, as folks told me before I came out, she has these many years devoted herself to manufacturing all sorts of articles. She's allowed her land to go under grass, and hasn't been growing the crops that once she used to produce. There's the Argentina, there's America, there are the wide wheatfields of Canada to supply her."

"Or were," Jim said laconically, "or were, young Bill."

"Aye," agreed Larry, with a puff of the lips, "and will be yet, Jim. You are thinking of submarines. Well, it'll take all the submarines that the Kaiser's got, and a heap more, to keep America from sending food to our British allies. But you was talkin' about ships, Bill. What then?"

"There's others full of ammunition—ammunition made in American factories—going over to be fired by British and French guns. There'll be steamers and sailing vessels. Seems to me that, as not one of us three knows one end of a ship from the other, we'd better keep away from sailing vessels. There would be jobs, perhaps, aboard one of the steamers, and we might manage to get taken on."

"You! Take you on!" said a huge upstanding figure with a ruddy face, whose curly locks protruded from beneath the blue sailor cap he was wearing. "You!" he laughed, almost scornfully, and yet with a kindly note, as he stood over English Bill and peered down at this smiling youngster. "Think as we've got jobs for such as you aboard our vessel!"

Then he laughed outright, and clapped a huge hand on Bill's shoulder.

"You'll be English," he said.

"Aye. English Bill, we call him," Larry interjected.

"British!" Bill fired out, "same as these here two, only they're American."

"American, of course," the huge sailor responded, looking a little puzzled. "But British? How?"

"He means," said Jim, with one of his pleasant smiles, "that America's allied with Britain and France and all the rest of the Entente against the Kaiser and his barbarians, so that we are all one and the same—all friends, all fighting for the identical cause. Besides, Bill and we two are chums, so it don't matter whether you call us all three Americans or all three British. I ain't ashamed of being one or the other after seeing the way Britons have shown up, have come forward by the million, have fought the Hun in France and many another place. After that, why, who's going to be ashamed of being mistaken for a Briton? Not me, eh, Larry?"

"Nor me neither," jerked the latter, his head thrust forward as was his wont, his cap tilted at a most dangerous angle, his eyes screwed up, peering at the big sailor. "See here," he said, "I like yer look, stranger. Yer come from aboard that ship, do yer?"

"I do," the man admitted, and then laughed uproariously. "You three just take it! And what may be yer wants? This 'ere youngster you've called English Bill has asked for a job. Well, there may be a job—two or three of 'em; only what for? What's your game? There's talk of America adopting conscription, eh?" and he looked a little slyly at them—a little sharply at Larry and Jim, whereat the former actually scowled and then smiled.

"I know what you're thinking of, but it's natural. Down at the mines, if a chap had said that to me, most likely there would have been shooting. You are right, though. There has been men elsewhere, perhaps, that has tried to escape their national duty by slipping away from their country. Well, stranger, just listen to this. We three are bound for France. We're in a hurry to join up and get a slap in at the Germans."

Thereupon they sat down on the quay-side and told their story, to which the big sailor listened intently, sometimes scowling, then nodding his head in evident approval.

"Tom's my name," he said, when the yarn was finished—"Tom Burgan, but Tom'll be good enough for you young fellows; and let me say I like yer spirit. It was a pity, though, that you didn't nail that Heinrich. I should say that he was an enemy agent. There are lots of 'em in America, as you people must know by now, seeing the way there have been fires at works which have been manufacturing munitions for us Britons. What do they call that, eh?"

"Sabotage," said Jim.

"Aye, something of that sort," agreed Tom. "'Sabitarge,' let's call it. Dirty work, whatever you calls it. Pity is, I say, that this Heinrich escaped, 'cause he's free to carry on the same sort of work elsewhere. And he shot young Bill's father, did he? And he was a good man, eh?"

Bill's lips twitched; they always did when his father was referred to.

"A good man, Tom!" he ejaculated; "there never was a better."

"And proudly spoken, too. Happy's the man that knows that his son will say that of him. Well, let's hope you'll meet this German again; only, look out for squalls if you do. As for the search you made for him, it must have been tricky business in that mine. It must have been nervy sort of work seeking for him in those dark passages. And now you're looking for more trouble. That don't surprise me. Every man that's the proper age—and the younger and more active he is, the sooner he seeks it—seeks for something over in France, on the high seas, or elsewhere, some job that he can do to put a spoke in the wheel of the German Emperor dominating the world. Well, he flooded the sea with his submarines to keep all ships from sailing. Ho, ho,

ho!" laughed Tom uproariously, disdainfully, and the trio who listened to him joined in heartily. "But come aboard; we'll go and see the old man."

"Old man?" said Jim.

"Aye, old man," Tom repeated, winking at Bill, who evidently understood the meaning of the words he had employed.

"Old man?" said Larry, a puzzled look on his face. "See here, Tom, and no offence meant, I don't want to be serving under no old man."

"You come aboard," said Tom, gripping him by the shoulder and lifting Larry to his feet as if he were a child or a doll or some quite inconsiderable person. "The old man's my skipper. 'Old man' stands for skipper in the navy. You'll find him young enough even for your liking. Step aboard."

"Af'noon, sir," he said, addressing a dapper, clean-shaven, nautical individual who at that moment emerged from a companion and stepped on the deck before them. "Here's three who wants to make for France to fight the Germans. There's three jobs goin' aboard, for you're short of your complement by that and more. How'll they do? This 'ere lad's English to his toe-nails."

"Oh!" The nautical individual looked Bill up and down in that swift way that officers have, and seemed to take in every tiny feature. "To his toe-nails," he tittered, for Tom was quite a character aboard the ship, and could take certain liberties with his officers.

"Aye, sir," repeated Bill, liking his look, "from the hair of my head to the soles of my feet, and these two are Americans, just as much American as I am British."

"And what can you do?" asked the Skipper, for it was he undoubtedly. "This young fellow," and he pointed to Jim, "looks strong and steady, and could do almost any job aboard. Young Bill, here, will fit in almost anywhere, but you——" and he pointed a finger at the diminutive Larry. Even to be unusually kind to him and a little flattering, Larry, with his small attenuated figure, his ill-fitting clothes, his absurdly big head, and his somewhat buccaneering appearance, was anything but an attractive object, and

certainly looked as though he were hardly capable of strenuous work. "But you——" repeated the Skipper; "now I have my doubts!"

It was like Larry to fire up at once.

"Doubts! See here, Old Man," he growled.

Whereat Jim put out a restraining hand, and Tom, enjoying the joke, roared heartily.

"He can do a day's hard work with anyone, yep," said Jim; "and if you was to get into any sort of trouble this here Larry would be a good man: he can shoot, he can. When we're out at sea he'll give you a show, and if it's a case of hitting a dollar at ten yards or of perforating a tin that's thrown in the air, why Larry's your man. And he ain't so fierce as he looks, nor so delicate neither."

The upshot of the whole thing was that then and there the three were taken on as hands aboard the vessel, for indeed it was hard to obtain full crews just at that period. A day later the ship cast off her mooring, backed into the Hudson River, and, swinging round with the assistance of a tug, was soon steering out towards the ocean. Little did Bill and his friends dream, as they looked back and watched New York disappear, and the banks of the beautiful Hudson River sink into the distance, that their voyage to Europe and to France would prove as eventful, even more so, as had been their last few weeks at the copper mine, where the German had put in an appearance.

A peaceful voyage was denied them, first, because the weather was unpropitious. A hurricane faced them as they gained the ocean, and for four or five days the vessel whirled amongst the waves, huge masses of spray bursting over her forecastle, while her decks heaved and tossed in a manner which tried even Tom and older sailors. As for Bill and Jim and Larry, all the fight was knocked out of them.

"I'd rather die!" groaned Larry, after many hours had passed, as he lay prostrated in his bunk. "Here, you, Tom!" he said feebly, "take me up and shy me overboard. I'd like to drown."

"You'll just sit up and swallow this 'ere 'ot cup o' stuff," the sailor told him, roughly gripping him with that huge hand of his; "now open yer face and

take it in. No lyin' down again, neither; up yer get! Move up and down! Now you, Jim! Bill's already feelin' better—youngsters do. How's that, Larry? It's made yer feel good and warm inside. What?—you won't? Oh, won't yer?"

And Larry did in most obedient manner. Indeed Tom's friendly treatment soon brought him round, so that, as the gale abated, all three were already proving useful. It was then, or a little later, that events occurred to disturb the remainder of the voyage.

CHAPTER V
A German Agent

"I've been thinking," said Bill, on the fifth evening after the three friends had left New York on their journey to Europe.

"Aye," said Larry in his slow way. "Thinking of what, Bill?"

"Wonder," said Bill, "what a man would want out here in the middle of the ocean to be slinking along the deck at night as if he was afraid of meeting people."

Jim and Larry looked at him in some astonishment, a little puzzled to know what he meant.

"A man slinking along at night out here?—Where?—on this vessel?" asked Jim.

"Yep," came the abrupt answer. "What 'ud he want to do? Who'd he be afraid of meeting?"

"Meeting?" said Larry. "Is this one of the crew? Course he must be, though, 'cos there ain't anyone else aboard the ship; we ain't carryin' passengers. What do a man want to be slinkin' along at night-time for, Jim? It was at night-time, wasn't it, Bill?"

"Yep," again came the curt answer.

"And what else did he do?" asked Jim, beginning to get interested. "Tell us all about it."

"I was on watch," said Bill, "and Tom had sent me down from the fo'c'sle to the waist to get him a drink of water. The ship was rolling about fairly well, and so I had to hang on to a stanchion as I was crossing. I was just by the donkey engine when I saw a man on the far side passing me. He was hanging on too, going along almost on all-fours."

"Yes, yes," said Jim, "looks as though he was afraid of falling, same as you were. Perhaps he's a new hand, same as us, only——"

"Not that," said Bill sharply. "Someone shouted an order just then from the bridge, which was above us; the man squeezed himself in close to the donkey engine, and I could see him turn his face to look up at the bridge. He lay there two or three minutes and then slunk off. At the far end he disappeared, and I went on my errand. I did not think much of it then, but I have been thinking since. It was queer."

It was so queer that, after discussing the matter, the three decided to set a watch to see whether they could gather further information, and that night once more as Jim and Bill, who lay together in the waist, were about to return to their bunks, inclined to pooh-pooh the importance of the whole incident, a man's figure appeared, dimly seen under the light shed by the thin crescent of the moon, a man who slunk across the deck, sheltering behind the engine, the mast, and the hatchway. Then he was gone, only to reappear a little later, and then disappear once more just after an order had been called from the bridge and the man on watch on the forecastle had responded to the hail.

"It's mighty queer," said Larry when the three were closeted together in the cabin in which they were quartered.

It should be explained that the bunks usually handed over to the crew had, on this particular ship and on this particular voyage, been vacated for a special reason, and the space thus left free was filled with war material of an important nature. The ship herself, in pre-war days one of the ocean greyhounds which conveyed passengers between the United States and England, provided ample accommodation elsewhere for the crew as well as a 'tween-decks space for cargo—in this case, as has been hinted, of unusual value.

"Mighty queer," repeated Larry, as he thrust the stump end of a cigar into the corner of his mouth, American-wise, and chewed it savagely. "You're sure you're right, you young chaps. This feller, who is he?—one of the officers, crew, or what?"

Bill shook his head.

"Oh!" gulped Larry, drawing at his cigar and then regarding it severely when he found it had gone out.

"Couldn't say. Might be anything," said Jim reflectively. "It was too dark to be sure, but——"

"Yep, but——" Larry flicked the ash off the end of his smoke. "Yep," he repeated encouragingly, "but——"

"But he went for'ard."

"Oh, he went for'ard!" said Larry.

"For'ard!" ejaculated Bill; "but that's where——" and then he stopped in the midst of his sentence.

"That's where things of importance are carried," said Larry significantly, "things that if they was lost might hamper the troops in France, things what Uncle Sam's been hard at work makin' so as to down the Kaiser; now if ——"

All three looked in succession at one another, their suspicions clearly written on their faces.

"If," said Bill at last, "he wanted—this fellow we've caught a sight of—to break up the ship to sink the cargo—well, isn't he the sort of man that would slink about and not want to be seen, and disappear when there was a hail from the bridge? Should he look sideways at everyone and want to keep himself to himself? As to whether he's one of the crew or not, who knows?"

Finally they came to the conclusion that no one could guess, and that positive evidence was required before they could proceed further with the matter.

"Only," said Jim in his quiet reflective way, "it's up to us to give a hint to the old man. Supposing now we set a watch and the fellow eludes us and really does a mischief, who'd be blamed? Who'd blame themselves most? You would Larry—you and I and Bill."

"But supposing it's a mare's nest, what about it?" asked Larry, pulling hard at his cigar. "The old man would point at us, the officers would smile, the men would smirk and have a few things to say that wasn't altogether complimentary. I'm a quiet sort of chap I am, Jim, but when fellers gets sarcastic it gets my goat up. I can stand fun—lots of it—skylarkin' don't come amiss to me nor to Bill either, and I dare say you can enjoy a little of it; but downright contempt, nasty sort of sarcasm, that gets me every time, and I find myself fingering my gun, that is, I should if I carried one, which I don't now, seeing it's against the rules of shipboard."

In the end they approached Tom, the huge sailor who had befriended them in getting their berths on board the ship, and with his approval took the first opportunity of having a clandestine meeting with the Skipper.

"You've done quite rightly," the latter told them. "This may be a mare's nest, as Larry here says. In that case it doesn't go any further, not another man aboard the ship will know; though, as a matter of precaution, I shall tell my officers. They have all sailed with me for years and I can vouch for their honesty and patriotism, they are either British or American to the backbone —and that's something in these days."

"Guess it is," Larry ejaculated. "Well then?"

"Forewarned is forearmed," the Skipper said. "I'll not interfere further. You three, with Tom here, will take the matter into your own hands. One of you had best feign illness—serious illness I mean; and the other two can be put on duty night and day to watch him. Tom can be the sympathetic friend. We'll give it out that it's pneumonia or some other ailment which will account for two of the men—two friends that is—attending to him. After that you will make your own plans. Carry on, as they say in the army."

And "carry on" Bill and Jim and Larry did, with Tom's connivance.

"And you've give it out that it's pneumonia?" asked Larry in subdued tones that very evening, as Bill stood at the door of his cabin with a jug of milk in his hand, while Jim stood at the foot of his resting-place. "Every soul aboard knows as Larry, new hand—what we'd call a 'tenderfoot' way west —is down with a go of bronchitis and a cough what 'ud make his worst enemy sorry for him. Listen to it!"

The impertinent fellow coughed and coughed and coughed till Jim really felt anxious about him, while Bill, seeing the fun of the thing, laughed so heartily that the milk spilt from the jug, and Jim brought him up with an "about-turn".

"That's the sort of thing you'd do at the door of a sick-room?" he asked severely. "Here's Larry coughing his heart out, and you laughing in that heartless way. Put the milk down and go!"

If any one of the crew had been in the neighbourhood they would have seen the youthful Bill slinking away with his tail between his legs; for he recognized how injudicious his behaviour had been, though indeed Larry was to blame, since he was the cause of it. But a few hours' experience of this new plan caused all to settle down, and their hilarity to give place to essential seriousness. Indeed that night all realized that their quest meant much, not only to themselves and their shipmates, but to the British army, which was looking for the delivery of the goods which they were carrying.

However, they had yet to prove that their suspicions were well founded. It might, as Larry had said and repeated more than once with a sheepish grin, be "but a mare's nest", in which case all three friends, and the burly Tom in addition, felt—though they took care not to tell one another—that the position would be a little trying.

"You can take it from me," said Larry, when he had given up coughing violently, and he and Bill and Jim sat with their heads close together discussing the matter, "you can put it right like this: ef there's a chap aboard what's slinking about, he's either crazy or he's got something to slink for. What's a man want to slink about in the darkness for—eh?"

"Stealing," suggested Jim.

"Ho! stealing!" growled Larry; "as ef there was any one of us aboard worth robbing! No, that don't appeal to me; it's something wus."

"Worse," Bill also thought it. He stood for a while silent and thoughtful and then crept out of the cabin. Yet though he watched from the waist of the ship for an hour, and Jim, who relieved him, sat there for a similar period, nothing occurred to arouse their suspicions. A little later, Larry, with a

blanket wrapped round him, groped his way along the deck and lay down at the doorway which led into the forecastle.

"If the feller's on the roam, he's got to roam over me," he thought, as he made himself comfortable. "Of course it may be as he wants to get down one of the hatchways. Ef so, Tom, watching back there, will spot him."

Yet the night passed without incident, and on the following day the three friends continued with their plan, though now doubting more than ever the justice of their suspicions. As to the imposition they were practising, it was never suspected by any of the crew of the steamer.

"That there young Larry's ill," said a stoker, as he pushed his head up from the engine companion and wiped the sweat from his brow with a dirty rag, which had been clean that morning, and which he removed from his neck, as is the habit of the fraternity, "he's just the look of a man what 'ud go down. Pneumonia, eh?" he remarked, as he casually plugged tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "Huh! shouldn't wonder!" he nodded wisely. "Thin, delicate sort of a chap what 'ud break up easy. That sort doesn't make old bones. Perhaps dead afore morning! You never know! So long, sonny!"

The beaming face, the smoking clay pipe, the black head of tousled hair disappeared; the stoker dived down into the bowels of the ship, and the man to whom he had addressed his somewhat lugubrious remarks heard the rattle of his stoking shovel a few moments later. If the stoker himself could have seen Larry his exclamations might well have been varied.

"Never felt better in all my life," said the invalid, as he sat in the corner of the cabin, smoking a cigar, which, as was his wont, was tucked into the corner of his mouth alongside his teeth, and caused a bulge in one cheek. "Never! Only I'm puzzled about this matter, and don't I want to catch this fellow?—that is," he added, "ef there is a feller, ef young Bill didn't imagine him. He's young is Bill, and there's no saying ef he's grown out of all his youthful imaginings yit."

Whereat Bill flared up, and became even more determined to discover the culprit.

"For I'm sure," he told himself, as he walked up and down the deck, "that I saw someone—someone who was slinking about—a suspicious someone.

Well, we shall see. We are more than half-way across to England now, and in a couple of nights we shall make the north coast of Ireland. If anything is going to happen, it's got to happen pretty soon. We shall see!"

It was in fact precisely two nights later, when the ship had drawn within twenty miles of the Irish coast, and was making a direct run for her English port, that Bill, creeping along the deck, sighted a flitting figure.

"Come along," he whispered, running back to the cabin and beckoning Larry and Jim. "I've seen someone—he's down in the waist. Don't wait for anything, and be as quiet as you know how. I reckon we'll discover who he is this time."

They followed instantly, and, sneaking down the ladder, hid themselves beside the windlass, with a mast towering quite close to them, and there, breathless with their haste, their hearts thumping with excitement and expectation, they waited, peering this way and that, seeing nothing for the moment. A little later Bill stretched out a hand and touched Larry on the shoulder.

"There!" he whispered. "There!" and, swinging round, Larry, too, caught a faint impression of a head and shoulders against the star-lit sky. He waited while Jim drew closer and also saw the figure.

Then all three crept along the deck, one behind another, as a man on the far side of it drew away from them.

"Bound for the fo'c'sle," Larry said hoarsely. "It's locked ain't it?"

"Locked," answered Jim laconically. "But he'll have a key. Listen to it!"

There came to their ears the faint click of an instrument being used in the lock of the forecastle door—a gentle, grinding sound, and then silence.

"Come on," whispered Bill; "perhaps he's gone in. Got your flash lamps?"

All three had, and, making their way swiftly along the deck, they soon reached the bulkhead behind which lay the forecastle. The door, previously shut fast and locked, stood ajar. Bill pushed it open without hesitation, Larry pressed up beside him, and Jim peered over their shoulders. Then Bill switched on the beam of his electric torch.

The light flooded the forecastle, fell upon that material so valuable to our fighting forces which the vessel was carrying at full speed to Britain *en route* for the battle-fields, swept over a space of empty deck, hugged other material, and glancing from it went on to the depths beyond, almost to the bows of the vessel. There it was brought up, as it were, abruptly by the figure of a man, half-bent, facing the doorway, a man at whose feet stood a square iron box, in the lid of which was a metal plunger, a man who stared at them with wide-open eyes, startled yet full of hate, which blinked in the electric beams.

"It's—it's Heinrich!" roared Larry, darting forward and slipping a hand on his empty holster pocket. "It's the German that shot Charlie back there in the camp by the copper-mine. It's the same ugly phiz as was in the picture found in his lodgings. It's——"

With a hasty movement the man banged a fist on the metal plunger. A brilliant flash of light followed the movement, and then a hissing, sizzling noise, while smoke filled the forecastle. Steps were heard, and the door above banged as the rascal, too much concerned for his own safety to think of any further need for caution, clambered up the companion and emerged on the deck, then came a blinding flash, and Jim, seizing Bill and Larry, dragged them through the doorway.

"Back!" he shouted. "Lie down on your faces! Hi there, on the bridge!" he bellowed. "Look out for yourselves! we've come upon our man, but it's too late; he's fired his detonator, his bomb's on the point of bursting."

Before a return hail could come, almost before the three could fling themselves upon the deck, so as to escape the effects of the impending explosion, the deck above the forecastle soared into the air, there came a shattering, tearing roar of breaking woodwork, a deafening detonation, while bolts and masses of wood and iron thudded upon the decks around or splashed into the water—water made clearly visible by the flare which burst from the fore part of the vessel. As for the latter, she trembled in every timber and plate, her decks shook and rolled, she heaved and thrust her bows upward; then they came down with a souse, and for a moment it looked as though she were going under. But not yet! She lay with her stern high in the air and her forecastle slowly submerging; and as she lay there

helpless, changed in one moment from a controllable dependable unit of efficiency to a shattered wreck, of a sudden a beam broke the blackness all about her—an electric beam projected from some surface vessel. This beam flooded the ship, flooded the water all about her, and threw a streak of brilliant light from a point perhaps half a mile from her.

Somewhere in that streak there appeared a tiny object, a tiny boat in which a single man rowed furiously—doubtless he was the German.

CHAPTER VI
Bombed in Mid-ocean

Darkness covered the scene a minute after that shattering detonation which had lifted the forecastle of the ship in which Larry, and Jim, and Bill were sailing. The deafening report, the shattering sound of raining woodwork and iron, and the swish of timber and bullets as they fell in the water were succeeded by a deathly silence. No one called out, not a cry escaped the crew of the vessel. From that point, half a mile distant across the level surface of the water, from which a brilliant beam had played upon the scene there came not so much as a whisper, not a hail, nothing to denote whence the light came, or from what source—whether enemy or ally—and then, of a sudden, the darkness was rent, though in puny form, by the comparatively feeble light from a torch wielded by Larry. Those who stared down from the bridge to the waist of the ship could make out the dim form of the American, with Jim and Bill near him, and could see Larry's right arm moving up and down, his fist shaking in the direction from which the light had flashed upon them.

"Of all the scoundrels!" he was shouting. "Of all the low-down German skunks! And we was too late to take him, we was, Jim! Gurr!" The fist came down with a bang upon his somewhat attenuated chest, whereupon Larry coughed.

"Silence!" There came a hail from the bridge. "To your boat stations! Larry, come up here, and your friends too, and report what's happened. Mr. Quartermaster, go forward and report."

Mr. Quartermaster promptly carried out the order, in fact he was already on his way for'ard as it came, and presently returned bearing a smoking lantern.

"It's driv her deck right off and blown a hole right down through her, sir," he reported. "There's six foot or more water in the fore part of the vessel, and she's down four foot or more."

"Sinking?" asked the Skipper curtly.

"Aye, sir, sinking!"

"Ah! and how long will she take?"

"Depends!" came the answer. "If the bulkhead holds she might make a port safely. If it don't"—the burly Quartermaster shrugged his shoulders—"if it don't, well it don't!"

For a while they stood there on the bridge, considering the matter, and then the Skipper himself took the lamp and went for'ard, taking Jim and Larry and Bill with him, while the ship's electrician followed with a couple of high-power lamps with which to illuminate the part which had been damaged.

"Not so bad as I thought," said the Skipper after a while, when he had thoroughly examined the matter. "You can douse that light now, for it will be seen far out at sea, and that submarine which picked up the German might become inquisitive. There's a chance of saving her, I think, only it's almost impossible to say at night-time. At the first streak of dawn we'll have a careful investigation of the ship, and meanwhile we'll victual our boats and make all ready. There's one thing I'm glad to see: the explosion has shattered the deck above and has blown a hole downward, but it doesn't seem to have damaged much of our cargo; in fact, the effects of the high-explosive have not spread except directly upwards and downwards; and that is fortunate—that is to say, if we can save the vessel."

The remainder of the night was spent in swinging out the boats and in carefully victualling them all, food and water being placed in every one of them. Then the men sat down on the deck and smoked as calmly as might be, uncertain of the morrow, yet, sailor-like, as confident as ever. As the dawn came, hot coffee was served round together with ship's biscuit.

"It'll do no harm to any one of us," the Skipper said; "and an empty stomach doesn't conduce to high courage; a chilly early morning and hunger don't let a man tackle a job squarely. Now then, we'll have a good look round. Ha! four feet down, you said, Mr. Quartermaster. I should say she was six feet down by the head now. Ugly! Don't like it!"

"Only, she ain't more down than she was last night," came a moment later the most emphatic answer. "I'll swear to it. At night-time a man's likely to be put out a little in his measurements, and that's what's happened, I believe. If she's deeper its only by a matter of six inches, which you'd expect, seeing that I sounded the water in her hold within half an hour of the explosion. If she ain't sunk by now, sir, she won't sink by this time to-morrow; that is, if you don't drive her too hard, and if the weather don't come up over too rough and blowin'."

"If," sniffed Larry. "I'm not a sailor, but even I can see that things are queer. Only if there's a chance of saving her we'll stand by. Trust us!"

A cheer came from the men who stood round waiting for the Skipper to decide finally what was to happen. Once more he went forward, and now that there was bright daylight, and he was able the better to examine the damage, it was not long before he returned to them, his face set, but his eyes bright and glowing.

"She might sink any moment," he told them abruptly, looking round at the expectant faces. "In that case she'd take us all down, and the boats too. Well, those of you who don't like the outlook had better launch a boat or so and clear off."

"Oh! Ah! Aye!" came from the assembled crew, while one—a foreigner from a neutral country—whimpered. Tom, the giant Quartermaster, turned, growling, upon him. Then he swung round.

"What about you, Skipper?" he asked bluntly.

"Yep! what about you?" lisped Larry in his inimitable manner. "Me and Jim and English Bill has got a little inquisitive, ain't we?" he asked, whereat the two chums nodded.

"Aye, very inquisitive!" Jim chimed in.

"And I'll tell you why, sir," Bill said. "If you are not going over the side into one of the boats to pull away, if you are going to stay here with the chance of being pulled under——"

"Well, what of it?" asked the Skipper, his eyes deep sunk, sparkling in the morning sunlight.

"That's all about it, then," Bill answered him, just as abruptly; "we're not going either. You are in command here, and if you tell us it's no longer a case of ordering us to stay, and that you are going to stand by because it's duty or something of that sort, because you are going to save the ship and her cargo, and by doing that to help your country, that means that every mother's son of us that's English stands by you, and every mother's son of us that's an American ally does the same—eh, Larry?"

That individual merely tilted his peaked cap a little forward, hitched up his baggy trousers, and slapped the empty pocket wherein he was wont to keep his revolver.

"Yep," he replied, and finally extricated from the depths of one of his coat pockets the stump of a cigar, which went into its accustomed position. "Yep," he lisped again; "I rather like it, Skipper. Supposin' she was to go down now and pull us with her, it wouldn't be worse than being blown sky-high, the same as that Heinrich something-or-other would have done with us. Sky-high, eh? You wait until I meet him again, I'll 'sky-high' him! But it's get in at it, Skipper. You are staying, so am I, so's English Bill, and so's Jim and Tom and every other mother's son of us. What? No; I've made a mistake. Here's one as wants to go over the side and pull off into safety! You—you——" he began, as he stepped towards the shrinking sailor who had whimpered.

"Stop!" commanded the Skipper. "Lower one of the boats and put this man in it; only, see that there are no oars. He can tow aft, and if the ship shows signs of going down he can cut himself adrift, otherwise if he cuts he will be alone. In any case he will be safe, and that's what he considers of uppermost importance. Now, lads, we've got to hold a council of war. Tom, it's my belief that if we push the old girl along even in this sea, for you can't call it rough, we shall burst in our for'ard bulkheads, swamp her 'midships, and send her down like a stone."

Tom agreed. He nodded that big curly head of his and turned his quid into the other cheek.

"So we'll run her astern. She's sound there, and no sea that's running will do her any harm. It'll make steering a bit of a job, but it's not impossible. Of course I shall lay a course for the nearest port, which means some little corner on the Irish coast. If she gets deeper down in the water, and looks like foundering, I shan't wait to run her into a port, but shall beach her on the first opportunity. After all, boys, it isn't the ship that matters so much, though ships are valuable these days and getting more so, it's the cargo we've got, and that we must save at any hazard."

All through that day the crew stood by the Skipper gamely, so gamely that, what with their jovial faces and their satirical remarks to the sailor seated in the boat towing behind the vessel, that worthy managed to scrape together a modicum of courage. He even begged to be taken aboard, and, finding that no one took the slightest notice of him, finally pulled on the rope, and, getting close under the bows of the vessel, now sadly sunk and projecting only a little way from the water, he managed to clamber aboard, and found his way across the wrecked planking.

Towards evening the wind, which had been swinging round to the west since the early hours, veered to the east and began to blow more strongly. The swell, which had rocked the vessel ever so gently during the day, became bigger, and soon waves were washing against her sides and were causing her to roll and to plunge, every plunge sending her bows deep under, till at times it appeared they would never rise again. Yet the crew stuck to their posts. Fortunately, too, every hand was required to assist in navigating the vessel, for, going astern as she was, it was no easy task to keep her on a course, and at least four men were required at the wheel, which now steered her, her automatic steam steering-gear having got out of order. What with preparing the boats, making ready for their rapid launching, cooking food, hauling ropes, and standing by the wheel, every member, whether steward or deck-hand, had ample employment, and therefore sufficient distraction from his dangerous surroundings.

Yet in spite of distractions it became greatly and increasingly obvious to all that the vessel was sinking deeper, that her buoyancy was gone, that she lifted now so very slowly from the trough of the seas that a larger one following in her wake might easily overwhelm her. Yet the eyes of the Skipper still flashed and glowed as warmly as ever; Larry strutted the deck

as gamely as he had done on the first day when he had stepped aboard as she lay in the Hudson River; Jim, his arms bare to the elbow, worked as cheerily as any member; while Bill—English Bill, as he had naturally come to be called—carried on as though nothing out of the usual was occurring. It was five o'clock in the evening when the Skipper, pointing to the Irish coast-line, now some four miles distant, gave the order to beach the vessel.

"She may or she may not carry as far as that," he added, his lips compressed together. "If she does, it's a flat beach and a high tide, so the cargo will be salved without much difficulty, even the vessel might be salved later on, though I am not thinking of her in particular. Keep her on that course, Mr. Quartermaster; she'll do. I'll go right for'ard so as to con her when we get to close quarters. English Bill, you come along too, and bring Larry and Jim. You might be useful."

The sun was sinking, and already evening was drawing in, but the light was sufficiently good to enable all hands to see the Irish coast clearly. Peering at it through the glasses which the Skipper lent him, Bill could make out a flat pebbly shore, with land rising gradually from it. It looked indeed the very place on which to beach a vessel, and, better than all, the beach seemed to stretch for miles, so that though the ship could only steer an erratic course it was hardly likely that she would miss some portion of the part selected for landing.

"What's that? Look yonder!" Jim called out a few minutes later, as, having watched the shore for a time, he swept his eyes seaward. "That, sir——"

"A submarine! Possibly the one that took off that rascal last night. A submarine without doubt, and coming to the surface. She's up! She's raising her guns! There's no doubt that she took it for granted last night that the bomb had destroyed us, and, finding us now still floating and about to beach the vessel, she's going to shell us. Stand by, boys! You three remain here, so as to help con the vessel; I'll go on to the bridge to make other arrangements."

Cool and determined, he ran aft to the bridge, and gained it as the submarine opened fire upon them. A shell, indeed, flicked its rapid path just above the bridge, and hitting the charthouse, stripped the roof from it.

"Boys," called out the Skipper, as cool as ever, "swing out the two boats here on the starboard side. The ship will give them shelter. Lower them into the water and let 'em tow. Now, all hands at it! One moment, though. You, Tom Spencer, get down to the engine-room and send the Chief Engineer to me."

As the vessel's screws pulled her still nearer to the Irish coast, and the men set to work, rapidly yet in good order and without confusion, to lower the boats on the side farthest from that point where the submarine had made its appearance, the guns aboard the latter—for she carried two—got the range and began to burst shrapnel over her decks. A man fell; the front of the bridge and the canvas screen along it were torn into shreds. Another man, standing on the bulwark guiding the falls of one of the boats, let go his hold, staggered, and tumbled head foremost into the water. An instant later Tom, the Quartermaster, dived in after him, and as the Skipper looked over the side he saw the sturdy form of the lusty sailor rise to the surface bearing the man in one arm. By then a couple of hands had swung down the falls into the boat, and the two were dragged into her.

Crash! A shell plunged across the decks near the after part of the vessel, where Jim and Larry and Bill stood, and, hitting the deck house which sheltered the steam steering-gear, rent it as if it were made of cardboard. The explosion drove the trio to the rails, and left them staggered and gasping. Another, bursting high amidships, flung the men at the wheel in all directions.

"Steady, boys!" called out the Skipper. "Four more of you get to that wheel! Larry, how's she doing?"

"As straight as a die! She'll do!" came the cheery answer. "Now, you young chaps," went on Larry, as a shell ricochetted from the sea close under the stern of the vessel, "you two had best get along towards the bridge and go over the side into the boats. The hands are all tumbling into 'em. They'll be clear of shells there, the ship'll give 'em shelter."

"And you?" asked Jim, while Bill looked sharply at Larry, looked quite indignantly at him in fact.

"Me——?" began Larry, as though he were intensely astonished at the question. "Oh, me? I've been given the job of staying here, but you ain't. You cut off, you two."

There might have been an explosion on the spot, judging from the appearance of Jim and Bill. They were, in fact, on the point of reminding their chum that they too had received orders.

"Leave the job? Funk it?" began Bill.

"See here," Jim shouted. "I—we——"

The arguments, whatever they were, were cut short by a blinding flash, by a shattering detonation, then, so far as the trio were concerned, by nothingness. A shell had burst against the ship's counter, wrecking her rudder and smashing a huge hole in her plates just above the water-line. In its course it crumpled the deck above upwards as if it had been made of paper, and, bursting its way through, probably ricochetting from one of the main beams of the vessel, it scattered Jim and Bill and Larry in the very midst of their argument. It flung them far from the ship, and sent them sprawling in the water, where, fortunately for them, the cold revived them and helped to keep them conscious. Yet it was only in a half-conscious way, automatically, as it were, that each one battled and supported himself in the water, while his head swam, his brain reeled, and his ears were filled with strange noises.

Little by little the ship passed on. Now and again other shells crashed against her. More than once, Bill, peering through his wet eyelashes at her, heard the sound of voices, and then presently saw a beam of light flash from the shore, and watched as the vessel slowly grounded.

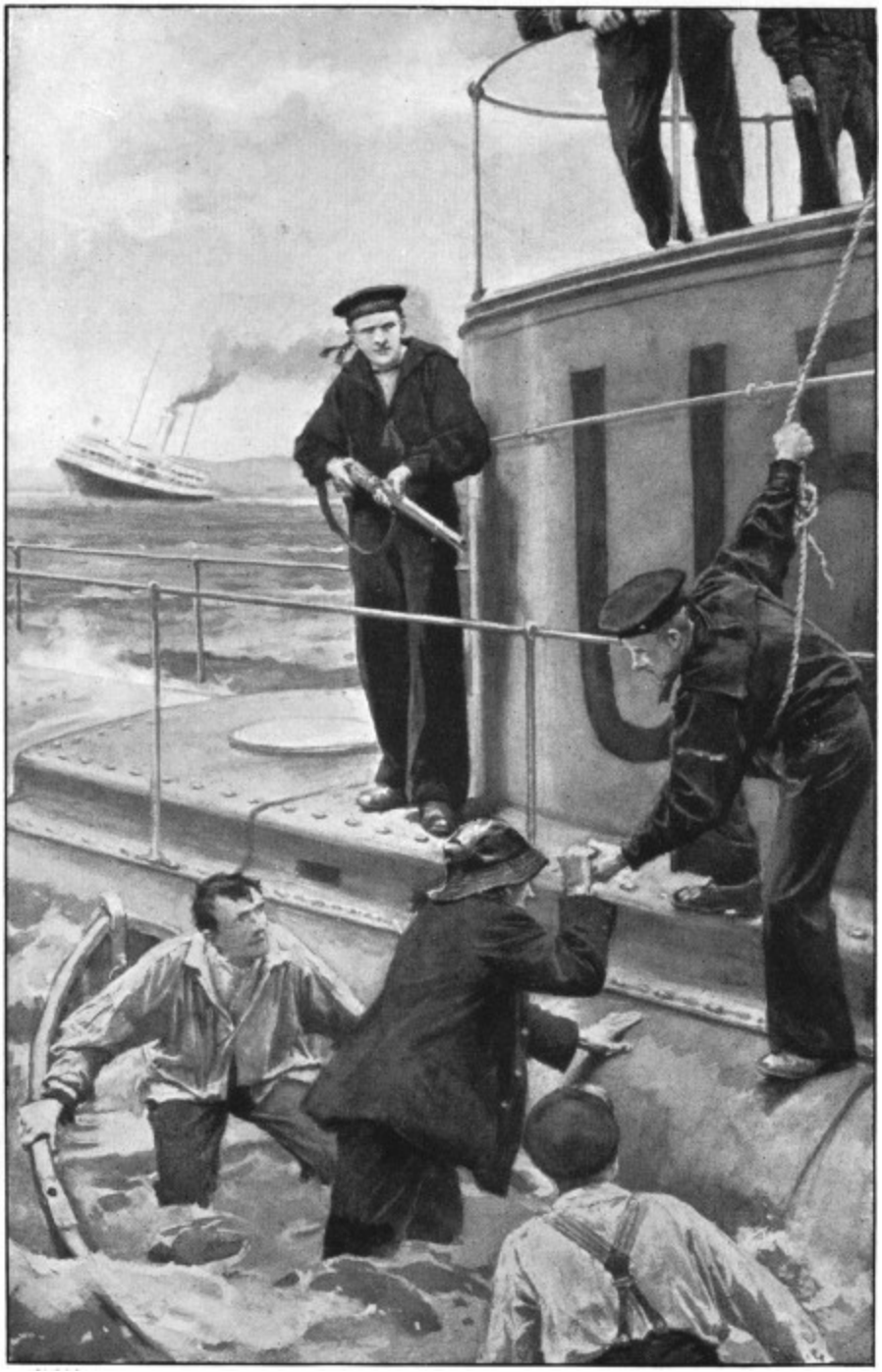
"Saved her!" he shouted, and then subsided, as the sea washed into his mouth and set him choking.

Something touched his shoulder. Something gripped him by his sodden coat-sleeve. He turned, and there, staring at him, illuminated by the beam from the shore, was a face with which he was familiar, no one could have mistaken it. It was the thin, cadaverous, smiling face of Larry, with those twinkling, merry eyes of his, that happy-go-lucky, inimitable look with which he always favoured his friends and his enemies.

"You!" he shouted, "and here's Jim too! Here, hang on, young Bill, we've got hold of something that looks like a bit of a boat. Now, if we get washed ashore, what a landing!"

"Only——!" Jim, who lay athwart the shattered boat, peering at the shore, blinking in the light, stretched an arm across their faces and directed their attention to a point closely adjacent. "Look there!"

It was the submarine, now awash with the surface, her conning-tower thrown open. A man was standing there, while on the deck below there were a couple of German sailors armed with rifles. Did they see the three wallowing in the water? Were they going to shoot them down? Heaven knows! German sailors, to their eternal dishonour, have shot down helpless people—aye, helpless women and children, too—in open boats after similar submarine warfare. But no. The submarine came closer, the officer in the conning-tower gave a sharp order and shouted. A man slid down her bulging side with a rope round his waist, and a minute or so later the three friends had been hauled on to her narrow deck. Then a guttural voice ordered them to clamber to the conning-tower.



THE THREE FRIENDS ARE HAULED ABOARD THE U-BOAT

As the good ship, which they had so gallantly helped to salve, settled down on the pebbly shore of Ireland, a wreck no doubt, yet with her cargo more or less intact, and, as it proved, easily and successfully salved, Bill and Jim

and Larry found themselves prisoners in the submarine, motoring away into the North Sea, bound for a German prison.

CHAPTER VII
Aboard a U-boat

"Which all comes of being in a hurry," said Jim, with philosophical calm, as he squatted against the side of the submarine in the narrow hole into which the Germans had pushed himself and Larry and Bill, and sat there with a pool of water increasing about him.

"Hum! Yes!" sniffed Larry, who in some miraculous manner had contrived to salve his peaked hat, and bring it aboard the submarine with him. He, too, sat crouched against the walls, the electric beams from a lamp flooding his head, his attenuated form, his somewhat sloping shoulders and short limbs, and casting a shadow of the man athwart the iron grids which formed the deck, till Larry, pictured in shadow, looked like a horrible demon. As for Bill, dripping with sea water, chilled to the bone, yet as philosophical as either of his companions—for friendship with them had taught him calmness and philosophy if it had taught him nothing else—he lay at full length, breathing heavily, a little depressed, yet, with youthful spirit, already beginning to think of the future.

"Which comes of being in a hurry! Yes, Jim," he agreed. "Only think what it's brought us to—a submarine! and I suppose we're already under the water."

The two friends nodded at him. "You can hear it outside. I felt her going down," said Larry. "Rummy feeling—eh? being right under the sea; running along without anyone being any the wiser. Supposing one of your British torpedo-boat destroyers—T.B.D.'s they call 'em—or one of ours, 'cos, don't yer know, Uncle Sam's already got some of his fleet over this side of the Atlantic, supposing they were to drop a depth-charge on us. Disagreeable—eh?" and Larry looked at Jim and Bill with that wry little smile of his, and shrugged his narrow shoulders; whereat Bill at least burst into laughter.

"You ain't going to frighten me in that way, Larry," he said. "Besides, if it bust this show it might send us clear of her. Of course I know it would be

awkward to go to the bottom like a stone, to find yourself boxed in this steel cage, unable to move out, waiting to be suffocated; we won't think of that! Let's think of France, of the fighting there that we're going to take a part in."

"That we mean to take part in," said Jim, with determination. "Wonder if these fellows'll give us something to eat, it was breakfast time at daybreak, and we've had nothing since then."

As if summoned by the speech, the door leading to the narrow compartment into which they had been thrust opened and a German sailor pushed his head in.

"Come out!" he commanded, and led the way over only a few short feet of deck to the central part of the vessel, where was all the apparatus that controlled her movements.

"Now tell us who you are," demanded the officer who accosted them, and who spoke excellent English. "First—British or American?"

"American," said Larry, pushing himself to the fore and speaking before Bill could get in an answer.

"Good country to come from—you'll never see it again," came the sardonic answer. "But as you're American, and not British, perhaps you'll get off lighter. If you'd been British I'd have pushed you overboard."

Larry looked at the man, contempt written on every feature of his sharp, determined face, Jim's lips curled, only Bill stood staring at the German as if he thought him a monster.

"Well?" demanded the naval officer.

"See here," said Larry, who made himself the spokesman, "this ain't the sort of place for you and I to have a conversation on this matter. If things was reversed, and you was me and I was you, which I'm glad it ain't, but if it was like that, then we might have a pow-wow. Being as it is, few words the better. As for us, if you says you'll push us overboard, we're bound to believe you. What then—we're Americans—what'll you do?"

"Depends! What was the cargo you had aboard the vessel? What damage was done?"

"Done! How?" asked Larry, curious to learn how much the Commander knew himself.

"By the bomb placed by our agent—a clever trick that!" said the officer; "a clever man Heinrich Hilker! But perhaps you don't know him."

Whereat Larry sniffed harder, but, feeling it wise to make no answer, stood staring round him at the various wheels and quadrants and instruments which filled almost every available inch of the centre of the vessel.

"Well then," demanded the officer, when a minute had passed, "what is your report?"

Larry looked under the peak of his hat into his eyes, regarding every portion of the officer down to his feet, screwed up his lips, smiled that enigmatical smile of his and answered not a word. Then, after a long pause, he tapped the officer on the shoulder.

"See here, Mr. Officer," he said, "you've taken us in what you call fair fighting, and we're prisoners; let it stand at that. You wouldn't expect to give away what had happened in your own case, supposing positions were reversed. Then don't expect it of an American. Play the game, and give us something to eat and drink, for we're well-nigh famished, and something strong would send the blood through us after being chilled in the water."

Maybe the German officer in command of this German submarine was of a type different from those who have commanded the majority of these under-water vessels, and who seem to have stooped to the murder of so many helpless individuals. He looked Larry up and down, stared hard at Jim, and stepped a pace closer to Bill, as if attracted by his youthful appearance and anxious to interrogate him. Then he clapped his hands, gave a sharp order, and saw the trio led back to the compartment in which they had been incarcerated. There a sailor brought them food and steaming coffee, adding to each cup some rum, which helped to warm them wonderfully. A little later he brought them dry clothing and took their wet garments away from the compartment; then, as if anxious to treat them well, he produced blankets and mattresses, upon which Larry and his two friends were soon stretched.

Indeed they slept for hours, worn out with their exertions of the previous night and with the struggle they had waged during the day which had just passed. Nor were their dreams unhappy. They fell asleep mindful of the unfortunate position in which they found themselves, but buoyed up by the memory of their success in helping to beach the vessel and her valuable cargo.

"It ain't as if the Hun had done us in altogether," said Larry just before he dropped asleep. "He was clever, he was, and that Heinrich was about the most cunning scoundrel that the Kaiser could have employed. See how he failed, though! Gee! That bomb ought to have blown the front of the ship away, and yet it left her cargo almost undamaged. Reckon, young Bill, your chaps is working like niggers now to get it salved, and—and—we're here."

"And alive and well," said Jim cheerfully.

"And while there's life there's hope. And there's the French front," Bill chimed in in sleepy tones, "that's the next thing to be thought of."

Yet other things soon arose to engage their attention. It was at an early hour on the following morning—though they themselves did not know that the day had broken, for it was quite dark in the interior of the submarine and the electric beams still flooded their compartment—that they knew that the vessel had stopped, and presently felt a breath of cool air as the door of their prison was opened.

"Come up!" a voice called, and obediently they clambered into the conning-tower and so on to the deck of the submarine. She was lying awash, and near her a surface vessel, a trawler by appearance.

"Hope you haven't had an uncomfortable night," grinned the officer in command of the submarine. "I'm transferring you to one of our mine-sweepers. She'll take you to Germany and to prison. *Bon voyage!*"

A boat pulled alongside and the three dropped into it and were rowed to the trawler, which, as soon as they were aboard, hauled in its anchor and steamed off, leaving the submarine still floating on the surface. Not that Larry and Jim and Bill were able to watch her, for immediately they reached the deck of the vessel they were hustled to a companion-way and forced to go down between decks. Here, when their eyes became

accustomed to the darkness, they found themselves in the hold of the vessel with a number of other occupants of the space seated against the bulkheads or against the sides of the trawler.

"Hello, mates!" began Larry, as if to open the ball. "Cheerio!"

A short, heavily-built man came forward at once. "You're British?" he said. "No, American!"

"No, both," said Larry. "I'm American, so's Jim, here. This here is Bill, who's English."

"Submarined?" came the next question.

"Yep. First done in by a German agent and his bomb, then gunned by a submarine. Me and my mates were blown overboard and rescued by a fellow in command of the submarine."

"Rescued! That's unusual! Why?"

Larry shrugged his shoulders. Indeed, neither he nor Jim nor Bill could tell why it was that the submarine commander had taken it into his head to preserve their lives. Too often, alas! men had been left floating helpless on the water after a similar attack, and the submarine, having risen to the surface, and its officers and crew maybe having jeered at them, had motored off and left them to their fate. It was no wonder then that this burly individual expressed surprise at such a happening.

"And you?" asked Jim after a while.

"Me and these fellows 'long with me belong to the merchant marine, and we've to thank a submarine for being here. It's three nights ago that, without a word of warning, without sight of the submarine, there was a terrific explosion that burst our plates in and swamped our engine-room. The chief engineer and his mates were killed right off, and our skipper was thrown from his bridge into the water. We chaps set to work to lower the boats, but they'd been smashed into matchwood. It so happened that this trawler was steaming some few miles away, and it may be that the same submarine that did you in was the cause of our misfortune. Anyways, we were taken aboard and brought to the trawler, and—and—here we are."

"Waiting to go to a German prison," came a voice from one of the figures seated against the bulkhead.

"Which means wellnigh starvation for the British," said another, whereat there was silence.

"If—starvation if——" began Bill, as though he had suddenly thought of something brilliant.

"If what, young Bill?"

"That is, if we get to a German prison."

"If—we—get—to—a—German—prison!" the burly individual repeated slowly, emphasizing each word in turn. "Now, you don't think—look here, my name's Jack, and I was bos'n aboard our vessel. You spit it out. What's the yarn?"

Larry looked at Bill curiously. In the dim semi-darkness of the hold he could see his face, not clearly, but sufficiently well to realize that his eyes were gleaming.

"Yep, Bill," he said encouragingly, "spit it out! It don't want any tellin' that neither you nor me, nor any of these fellows, wants to go to a German prison, but——"

"Aye, but," said Jim, "how are we to work it not to do so?"

"Depends," said Bill, "only it's got to be done quick, if at all. I'm only guessing, but I reckon we're steaming now for the German coast. There are mine-fields and all sorts of things through which a vessel has to thread her way, and once in those we couldn't easily make our way out again; so the sooner we get to work the better."

"Get to work! How?" demanded Jack.

"Like this. Make a row, shout, attract the attention of the guards, get 'em to come down here, collar one of 'em, take his rifle, fight our way up. I'm not sure, but I had a good look round when we came aboard, and counted only eight men. Two of them were armed, and stood near the companion down which we came, the rest were deck-hands. There will be the captain, too,

and a small staff down in the engine-room—they needn't count. If we're going to do it, we shall be through with the business and masters of the ship before the engineers knows what's happened. Then, if we are wise——"

The burly sailor clapped a hand on Bill's shoulder.

"You speak soft, sonny," he said; "you just talk gently for a moment. Bless me, but I believe he's got the very idea; and if the idea's any good it's as he says: it's got to be done now. This very moment, as you might say, within half an hour at most, and it's got to be gone through without whimpering. Boys, close round!"

Heads had been lifted in the meanwhile, the figures of men crouching against the bulkheads and against the side of the trawler, crouching despondently it must be admitted, had moved, had straightened themselves, while not a few of their fellow-prisoners had sprung to their feet and come nearer as Bill and his friends discussed the matter.

"Escape!" one of them said. "Why not?"

"Better than going to a German prison; better than being starved. I'd risk a hit," said another, "if I knew that I could get back to England. Besides——"

"Besides what? I'll tell you; besides every man's wanted to get our ships going. What then? What next, young fellow? How's it to be done?"

By then all of them were standing about Bill and his friends, peering at the youth in their midst, and endeavouring to decipher his meaning; their faces thrust forward, their hands on their hips, listening eagerly to every word he and his friends uttered.

As for Bill, he was rather taken off his feet by the sudden interest he had aroused. To be sure, as he came aboard the vessel he had taken a swift glance round, and had noticed what a small crew she appeared to carry. In a swift glance, too, he had taken note of the companion-way, and of the method adopted to close it. There was a door at the top, and against that had been placed a huge bale and a coil of rope, which, seeing that it opened outwards, effectually closed it. But strong men from within could easily push it aside, and—why not?

"There are two ways of doing the trick, I think," he told them, his voice now lowered. "One of them is to feign illness and to shout for help. That may or may not bring one of the guards down amongst us, but it will have the effect also of warning the remainder of the crew. T'other's to creep up, put our shoulders to the door, and heave it open. We'd have to chance a shot from the man on guard, but once we've mastered them we'd be free of the deck, and nineteen of us, as I make our number to be, should be able to overpower them."

"Line up, you men!" came from Jack. "This 'ere business wants in the first place a lusty chap with shoulders that will take no denyin'. It's a case for volunteers. Is any of you for it?"

If any of the guards had peered down into the hold of the trawler just then they would have witnessed a weird performance; they would have seen those eighteen sturdy men, all silent, desperately in earnest, line up, listening to the words of their leader. And as he spoke they would have watched the whole line step forward without a moment's hesitation. All were volunteers.

"So it's like that!" said Jack, and Bill could have sworn he chuckled. "Now, seein' that the companion won't carry every one of you, and one is bound to go first, and have another strong 'un by him, and seein' as I have the broadest shoulders of the lot—why, I go first, as is natural, then Jim Scott comes second, 'cos he's a heavy weight, and if I go down the door won't stand much of a push from him, will it? After that we comes as we can, but I'm goin' to tell each man of you off for special business."

"Hold hard! And what about us, Mister?" came from Larry, who pushed himself forward, automatically putting his hat at an angle as he did so, though the darkness hid the movement. "See here, Mr. Jack, it was one of this here party that fixed the business up. What have we done to be left to the last?"

For answer, the burly figure of the sailor came a little nearer and the two gnarled hands were stretched out, the fingers extended, and, falling upon Larry's attenuated shoulders, passed thence down his arms, down his body, and finally to his legs.

"No offence! You're an American, and everyone knows that Americans are not the boys to hold back, but rather the ones to be right in front," said Jack. "But it's beef that's wanted here, sir, British beef, and me and Jim's got it. I don't say as we ain't got the pluck too, but pluck won't push that door at the top of the companion open. Weight will, beef will—get me?"

Larry did. He had already summed up the business with his quick American wit, and liked the bos'n and his bluff statements, liked the bold way in which he had adopted Bill's ideas. That the other men below fancied the English sailor there was no denying, and if it had not been for the need for secrecy they would have cheered him. Then, too, there was the added need for haste, there were those mine-fields to be thought of, and the fact that every minute carried the trawler, presumably, nearer to some German port.

"Get you? Yep," said Larry. "'Carry on', as they say in the British army."

In deadly silence, feeling their way in the dim darkness of the hold, the imprisoned sailors made their way to the companion, up which Jack crept on all-fours, followed closely by Jim Scott, while the others—Bill, Larry, and Jim foremost amongst them—followed closely.

"You just shove easy and quiet first of all, so as to get a move on," said Jack, "and then out yer comes, every mother's son of yer!"

Leaning his whole weight against the door above, the sailor pushed with gentle force—with force which increased every moment. The wood creaked and bent. To those behind, eager for a successful result, it sounded as though the timbers would crack asunder rather than that the door would open. But no! Wait! In a moment a thin crevice of light showed; it grew broader; it was now a whole inch wide; then two, then three.

Bill, peering between the legs of Jack, who stood above him, could see right through on to the deck of the trawler, and then, with a heave and a hoist, the door was thrown right open.

CHAPTER VIII
Capture of the Trawler.

A deafening report greeted the coming of Jack and Jim and Bill and his friends through the doorway of the companion which led to their prison. A bullet flicked its path across their faces and buried itself in the bale which had been thrown against the door—then there was a crack. Sailor-like, with an agility of which one would hardly have thought him capable, considering his burliness, Jack had leaped at the German who had fired the shot, and, displaying much science in the manœuvre, undercut him in a manner which astonished not only the marine, but some deck hands standing close beside him. For the German's chin went back, his head was jerked almost from his body, his feet left the deck a moment later, and he measured his length on the steel plates.

It was at that precise instant that Larry seized the falling rifle, and hardly a second later that Bill, coming swiftly after him, launched himself like an arrow in amongst the German deck hands. Jim was there too, following up his strokes, while another party of the sailors had turned sharp right and were sweeping the deck hands on that side of the vessel. As for the second marine on sentry-go, he was dealt with in the most disagreeable and summary manner—that is, disagreeable to himself—for one of the sailors, bobbing up from the companion like a jack-in-the-box, gripped the muzzle of his rifle as he was in the act of firing it, and, extending his other hand, took the German by the nape of his neck and exerted such pressure that the man first let go his weapon, then shouted, and later screamed with pain.

"And you ain't wanted," cried the sailor, lifting him bodily from his feet at last, "not here! So down yer goes!" And down the German went, falling like a bale down the companion and into the depths below, only at that moment cleared of British prisoners.

There, too, the deck hands were hounded within less than five minutes, leaving only the skipper of the trawler on his bridge above, an officer by his side, and the staff of the engine-room.

"Just you carry on, young Bill," cried Jack, seeing that the decks were cleared, and hearing at that moment a crack from a revolver as the skipper opened fire upon them. "This 'ere was your manœuvre; carry it through!"

Bill swung towards Larry with the thought of giving him an order, only to discover the American already stretched flat upon the deck, sheltering behind the mast, his rifle directed on the bridge. Indeed, almost at that same instant his weapon spoke, and the skipper, who by then had emptied his revolver in the direction of the escaping sailors, lifted his arms with a sudden spasmodic movement and fell back behind the canvas screen which crossed the front of the bridge. There, within a short space of time, appeared the face of the other officer, just peering over the screen, his hands raised above his head, calling loudly that he surrendered.

"Send along a party to the engine-room hatch, and order the men up one by one," cried Bill. "Larry, just get up on the bridge and nab that officer. What's doing, Jack? There's a commotion. That was a gun!"

"A gun!" Jack looked worried for a little while as he peered over the bulwarks of the trawler and looked seaward. "This 'ere trip's come off well, young feller, but it ain't the only fightin' we've got to do this time. That gun-shot came from aboard a sister trawler. You can see her there, steaming up out of the mist. She's heard the shooting. Maybe she thinks there's mutiny aboard, though, knowing there was prisoners here, she guesses what's happened. There's another!" he exclaimed as a sharp report sounded from the direction in which he pointed, while through the mist there loomed the bows of another trawler. "A shot's gone just ahead of us. Next time they'll get our range. Things then won't be very pleasant."

Bill clambered to the bridge and looked eagerly about him in all directions. Right aft he could see a party of the sailors standing about the hatch, which no doubt led to the engine-room, and presently a head appeared. A man was extricated by the scruff of his neck, and was tossed on along the deck to the companion, out of which Bill and his comrades had so recently emerged. There, at an order he had given now some minutes ago, stood two burly British sailors, one of whom was armed with a rifle, while the other had seized an axe from the rack round the mast. On the bridge beside him stood Larry, alert, and as eager as himself. At his feet lay the body of the skipper;

and then of a sudden his eye fell upon an object right forward, covered in tarpaulin.

"A gun!" he shouted, and waved eagerly to Jack. "Hi!" he bellowed. "There's a gun for'ard, Jack; see if you've got any men who understand it. There's a locker, too, near at hand, and there will be ammunition in it. Larry, you get along with one of the men and see if you can discover some rifles and ammunition, for we shall have to look for a boarding-party. If not rifles, then get axes, iron bars, shovels if you like from the stoke-hole, anything with which to repel the Germans. Jack, ahoy!" he shouted again, and that worthy, playing up to the young fellow whom he had placed in command, touched his cap and aye-ayed to him.

"Aye, aye, sir," he repeated as he came up on to the bridge, having sent four of his men forward to the gun.

"We have been making a bad mistake," said Bill. "She's still steaming, but now that we're taking the hands away from the engine-room she'll soon come to a stop. Put her about; and Jim, here, will take command of the stoke-hole. Send some men down with him, and let 'em stand over the German boys there."

He hailed the men standing at the opening of the companion which led to the hold.

"Order up those of the engine-room staff who have been passed down, and send them along to their job again. Some of 'em'll understand enough English; and just see that you get 'em!"

In between his orders, punctuating them in fact, came the thuds of the gun aboard the other trawler, which was now clearly visible, though at some distance. Fortunately, too, not yet had her shells reached the vessel, though they ricochetted astern and ahead and passed over her decks, without hitting her. As Jack put a man at the wheel and swung the vessel round, the shots went far astern, though a little later, the trawler turning too, they began to burst within a few feet of her bows, and looked as though presently they would come aboard her. By then, however, the scratch gun-crew, which Jack had sent into the bows of the captured vessel, had thrown off the tarpaulin which covered the gun, and very swiftly (for your British sailor is

a man of parts and smart at understanding things of that nature) they had grasped the meaning of the various wheels and levers, and had made themselves familiar with its breech action.

Inspection of the ammunition and a trial loading followed, and then a shot which shook the trawler and deafened those on her decks. Not one, but a dozen and more pairs of eyes followed the shot or fixed themselves upon the other vessel. Then a hoarse cheer burst from the men, for a splotch of white suddenly obliterated the bows, there was a blinding flash, and when the smoke had cleared away it was seen that the short bowsprit had been smashed, and that the halyards from it had been cut adrift. What other damage had been done by this lucky shot it would be impossible to say, but it was significant that the trawler sheered off at once, and steered a course which took her farther away rather than nearer to the captured vessel.

"Which just gives us time to get going," came a cool and very cheerful voice at Bill's elbow. "Young chap, you've done mighty well. I ain't goin' to say that me or Jim or any of the other chaps that was down below couldn't have thought out the plan of an escape that you happened on, but it was happening on it just then, at what you might call the psychological moment, that just did it; and since we broke out you've given your orders clear and sharp, and there's been only one bad one, Mister, amongst them."

"Getting the engine-room staff up—eh?" asked Bill.

"Yep," came Larry's short rejoinder. "But that's fixed now: there's Jim down below working like a slave-driver, standing with two other mates, one in the stoke-hole and t'other in the engine-room, and if you'll look at their faces you'll know, and the Germans know too, that they ain't going to stand any sort of humbug. It's a case of shoot the first time a German tries to mix up the engine, or to let steam go, or to do us down in some other dirty manner. Gee! Ain't we seen something of the Germans now? That Heinrich and his shooting of your father, and his bombing of that other ship; and what with Jack's tale, and the hundreds of others that we've heard of, why, don't you ask Jim nor me nor any other American to trust a German. We'll put the handcuffs on 'em first, and then perhaps we'll know they ain't going to do any further damage. But you sent me for arms, young fellow; well now, this here trawler, and probably every other one of 'em, has a sort of magazine, at

least I guessed it was that, though I couldn't read the words written on the door—this German language ought to be abolished! But I made free to cut a way in with an axe, and there was rifles and swords and what-not; every one of our men is now armed. Tuck this quick-shooter into your belt, young fellow. It ain't the sort of box-of-tricks that appeals to me, being too easy on its trigger; here's one of my sort—a heavy, cavalry revolver."

Automatically, not thinking at all of what he was doing, yet conscious of the meaning of Larry's words, Bill took the weapon and pushed it into his pocket; meanwhile he peered over the canvas screen which lined the front of the bridge, casting his eyes in the direction of the pursuing trawler, then turned in the direction of the gun which some of his own men were handling. Even to him, inexperienced as he was, the thought came that never before had he seen such calmness and such method and order. The gallant fellows, whom Jack had put under his command so suddenly and unexpectedly, were "carrying on" after the traditions of their service. Handy tars that they were, they had no sooner seized upon the ship than they settled down to the manning of her, as if she had been in their care for weeks past. There was no fuss or flurry about those jack tars, though, to be sure, there was haste and hurry, frenzied movement almost, as each man at the gun carried out the task which in every case was self-appointed. One swung her round and sighted her, another opened the breech, the third rammed in the shell-case, and sprang back for yet another, then all moved clear away, the lanyard was pulled, and scarcely had the gun recoiled, and the shell gone hurtling out toward the trawler, than the breech was flung open, while, through the smoke which issued, the man in charge of the ammunition pushed another shell into position. Thus, time and again the gun spoke—twice to every shot fired by the pursuing trawler; and if the gun were strange to these gallant fellows their shooting at any rate was precise enough—too precise in fact for the Germans.

"They are just about getting it about the ears," grinned the man who led the gunners. "How's that for a plunk under his bridge, getting her skipper in his stomick or under the belt, which is all fair in this 'ere warfare. What's that?"

"That" was a blinding flash yonder on the deck of the pursuing trawler, a burst of smoke, and then a flame which spouted up from the bridge at which the tar had aimed. But in warfare of this sort retaliation has to be expected,

and, almost as the three men raised a cheer, a shell screeched across the deck behind them, struck the mast just in front of the bridge on which Bill and Larry stood, and, bursting as it struck, brought the steel affair down with a crunching roar and a thud across the bulwarks, bending them out of shape and denting the deck, incidentally, too, missing the bridge by less than a foot, tearing away its screen and leaving our two friends as it were stripped naked, staring across an open patch of deck, now littered with the fragments left by the bursting missile.

"Bah!" growled Larry, tilting his hat at a little more of a rakish angle—a habit he had when greatly moved, though, to be sure, nothing else could be seen about him to suggest excitement. As for Bill, young though he was, he stood his ground without wincing.

"And ain't doing half bad," Jack the bos'n told the men he was then taking along the deck to clear away the wreck of the mast. "I've had me weather eye on him as you might say. I seed or rather heard from his voice when he came below and joined us that that young chap had got something good about him. Mind, I don't say as the Americans along with him ain't just as good, better you might say, seeing as they are older and has a right then to expect to be; but the youngster's sharp, smart, and has lots of go, besides being cool-headed. Cut this stuff adrift! Chuck it overboard; it's only hampering us, and if another shell comes in the splinters might do us damage."

His words were almost prophetic; for hardly a minute later an enemy shell burst inboard, and its shattering roar half-stunned Jack and his men and Bill and Larry; yet by some miraculous chance not one of them was severely hurt, though certainly shaken.

As to elsewhere—if the men at the gun, Jack and his deck hands, and Bill and Larry, were "carrying on", to use an expression beloved both of sailors and of soldiers, what of the men down below? Jack told the tale some five minutes later.

"If you'll believe me, sir," he said, clambering up on to the bridge and touching his cap for all the world as though Bill were a full-blooded skipper, "if you'll believe me, young feller, there's Jim, your chum, and his mates, working those Germans at the boilers as if they were slaves. Not a-

drivin' of 'em—oh, no! Only encouragin' of 'em like. You see, now that the tables are turned, and there's Jim and Charlie Pipkin and Joe Bent and two others—boys as I know of well—a-standing over the Germans with rifles, instead of the Germans a-standin' over them as they was a little while ago, the Hun's sort of lost all his spirit. If it had been the other way about, from what I seed of 'em—those chaps what talks about 'Kultur' and raves about the Kaiser—they'd have pushed the muzzle of a rifle under your ear, and they'd have made you move slippy. But, bless you, it only wants a look from that there chap Jim; and as for Charlie, when he just cocks his eye across one o' them Huns, the chap shrivels—fairly shrivels."

Jack burst into a roar of laughter which was hardly suppressed even by the scream and flick of a shell which crossed the trawler a little in front of them. He held his sides and bent back till his stout body formed an arc, and then set to work mopping his eyes, which were streaming. "It's a fair turn about, this," he said.

Larry cocked an eye at him in return, just as Charlie down below was described as doing to the Germans in the engine-room.

"It was. Yep," he lisped; "only—eh? Look over yonder!"

Jack looked, Bill looked, and in spite of himself blanched just a trifle. As for Jack, the colour surged to his bearded face and he gripped the rail.

"Oh! Ah! I——" he spluttered.

There was good reason, too, for his exclamations, for the mist which had been hanging over the sea when this brilliant little action opened, and which, as it were, had clouded the scene for a while and indeed had assisted Bill and his friends not a little, was now whisked aside by a fresh breeze which had got up in the meanwhile and was now rippling the surface of a sea of dull green colour on which the rays of the sun were reflected in every direction. Looking towards the German coast there was a haze, though no mist. The bright sun rays and the glittering reflection from thousands of ripples seemed to have cast up there an opaque haze, out of which the pursuing trawler emerged every now and again, a curtain which was rent asunder every odd minute by her gun, when a splash of flame, followed by

a cloud of smoke, filled in the gap and then subsided and was replaced by the opacity.

Towards the ocean, however, one could see a long distance, and there, but a dot yet, though visible to all eyes, was a low-lying, queer-shaped vessel—one of the greyhounds of the ocean, about whose bows foamed a white crest of water and from whose deck streamed black billowy clouds of smoke which formed, as it were, a huge screen behind her, against which her smoke-stacks and the crest of white stood out silhouetted sharply. It was a torpedo-boat destroyer.

"Huh!" grunted Larry.

"Hum!" coughed Bill, shielding his eyes.

Jack gripped the rails again and burst into bitter anger.

"And after all what we've done!" he blustered. "After we've been took at sea and clapped into the hold here like so many dogs—though I admit we might have been left to drown. After we've broke our way out and fixed things up in fine trim, and have got almost clear away safe from the trawler yonder, which ain't worth countin', to see that—that—image!"

Larry produced his beloved cigar, or rather the bedraggled end of one. He always seemed to carry one in his pocket. It went to his mouth, was pushed home into the favourite position, then two hands groped in his pockets for a sodden matchbox. Quite naturally he attempted to strike a light, lifted the damp match to the cigar, and threw it to the deck the next instant.

"How'd you know?" he asked suddenly. "She might be British."

"B—B—British?" shouted Jack. "British! By gum! she might, and in that case——"

"She ain't," Bill ejaculated. "I'll swear we've got the best of her in this position. We can see her clearly, standing out in the sun's rays. Look aft at the trawler. One minute she's gone in the haze, the next minute she comes up. So you can count that the ship yonder, or the men aboard her, ain't yet seen us, but they've heard the guns and are coming along to see what's happened."

"In which case," said Larry, looking aside at Bill, while Jack too turned to the young fellow.

"In which case," said Bill. "Well, there's nothing else for it; we keep straight on. If that's a German torpedo-boat destroyer it's bad luck; if it's British, well, it's British."

There was no need for further argument after that, for it was quite clear to all three of them, and indeed to the deck hands down below, and to those standing over the staff in the engine-room, to whom the news soon filtered, that liberty so recently won might already be on the point of being torn from them; and if it were, what sort of treatment might they expect from the Germans? What indeed? It was no wonder, then, that their spirits sank to zero when, perhaps a quarter of an hour later, the torpedo-boat destroyer having drawn much nearer, a gun spoke from her deck and a shot sailed over them. Meanwhile, too, the pursuing trawler had kept up her fire, so that Bill and his friends were now attacked from two quarters. It looked like hopeless failure; and yet, wait.

"What's that?" demanded Bill, pointing to sea eastward. "Another ship—eh? Another torpedo-boat destroyer! A Ger——."

"German?" shouted Jack. "You can skin me if that ain't a British torpedo-boat destroyer! You can hoist me to the top of the first yard-arm you comes across if that there boat ain't British from the cap of its mast down to its keel! Only, will she come up in time? that's the puzzle."

It was a point which might well bother him and Bill and the others, for, undoubtedly, if this second torpedo-boat destroyer was part of the British fleet, the German had a long start of her. That gun now opening upon the trawler might well destroy her, and the crew who had won their liberty, long before the British boat came up. It was a moment for quick decision and swift action.

"Swing her round! Shove her in the opposite direction! Keep her going as hard as you can," shouted Bill. "Jack, send a message down to the engine-room staff to stoke hard, all they can. We must knock every ounce of speed out of the trawler."

They turned, and, as it were, dived into the haze rising from the water, and as the engine staff laboured down below, and "whacked"—to use a nautical expression—the utmost speed out of the boat, a bow wave rose in front of the trawler. Behind came the other trawler, farther aft the German pursuing boat, and still farther astern, and from a different quarter, what everyone hoped was a rescuing British vessel.

CHAPTER IX
A Hard Fight

Long minutes passed before the end of the affair came, and before the fate of Bill and Jim and Larry and the rest of them was settled. Not that all the participators in this alarming and exciting adventure realized the length of time or found the seconds hang heavy upon them. These fled indeed faster almost than the thudding screw of the trawler pushed that vessel through the water. For every half-minute brought some new event, everyone was working to his utmost, and at every turn the position wore a different complexion.

"It's a time when every man has to work hard, to go all out," said Jack, as, dripping with perspiration, he clambered to the bridge to report to Bill. "You can believe me, young sir, but I've just come up from that there engine-room again, and, my! how them Germans do work to escape from their own people!"

The very mention of it tickled him so much that, in spite of their precarious position, this honest, burly sailor burst into uproarious laughter. Indeed, he might well do so, for the picture down below in the engine-room would have exercised the same influence on anyone of British nationality and blessed with a sense of humour. In amongst the eddying clouds of steam, with the thud and thump of the pistons and the deafening whirr of machinery filling the air, stood Jim on one of the engine-room gangways, gripping the rails and looking over into the smoke-clouds down below, peering now in this direction and then in that, fixing his eye upon some German "greaser"—just fixing his eye on him for a moment—and then swinging round to stare in another direction. No need to show the revolver, which he now wore strapped round his waist, no need to shout a peremptory order, no need to point, to gesticulate, to shake a fist. Those "greasers" knew. They cast glances askance at the young American now and again, and, seeing his square jaw, his determined appearance, flung themselves upon the task of keeping the engines going, well knowing all the time that they were steaming away from their own people.

From the stoke-hold, near at hand, from which now emerged bigger, whiter clouds of steam and smoke, came the clank of spades upon the steel decks, and the scrape as fuel was shovelled up and thrown into the furnaces. There, in what appeared to be an inferno of smoke and flashing beams of light as furnace doors were opened, amidst fiercest heat and sweat and incessant movement, stood two of the recently escaped British sailors, nonchalant, erect, one hand gripping the muzzle of a rifle and the other akimbo, resting upon their hips. They, too, glanced now here, now there, noting every movement of every man under their charge, but never moved. The glance alone was sufficient.

"They're keepin' them at work as if they was willin' slaves," Jack roared, mopping the perspiration from his streaming forehead, "and you'd hardly believe me, sir, but when I comes up on deck—and glad to get there too, for it's hot down below—I finds our deck hands a-fallin' in and makin' all ready to repel boarders. It looks like the good old days, and if only the Germans do get up, why, repel boarders it will be!"

Bill took a glance around him; not that he had not done so on many an occasion, and had seen all that was going on, but his chief attention was now engaged with the pursuing trawler and with the torpedo-boat destroyers, and with conjecturing where the next shell would fall and what chance he and his men stood of escape from the double danger behind.

"I'm beginning to think," he had just told Larry, "that the German destroyer will soon have her attention fully occupied by the other one—that is, supposing she's British; so if we can escape the shells she's firing at us now we shall have merely the trawler to deal with. She's drawing nearer, I'm sure. Perhaps her engines are bigger and stronger than those in this vessel; in any case we shall soon see. I don't fear her nearly as much as I do the destroyer."

Larry, from the view Bill and Jack obtained of him, cared very little as to what might happen. With his hat tilted forward in the most approved manner, sucking at his cigar again, he peered in the most nonchalant manner over the rail at the pursuing trawler, and hardly lifted his eyes as her gun spoke and repeated the shot—hardly even deigned to turn his head to

watch where the missiles went, though when one sailed close over the bridge he cocked his eye overhead, gave a shrug, and whistled.

"It's the miss that don't matter," he told Bill. "If she was plugging them things into us all the time a chap might get nervy and unsettled, but, as it is, this is playing. Seems to me, young Bill, that you'll soon be having to give other orders. You see, as things are, we're steaming away dead ahead of the trawler, and our gun, perched up there in the bows, ain't able to rake her, while she, with her gun in the same position, can fire at us all the time, and with no fear of return shelling. Now supposin' that destroyer there, what's German, does happen to give over because the other happens to be British, what's to prevent us turning round and going full ahead at the trawler, or steaming off at an angle, as you might say? Gee! Then we could pound her with our own weapon. D'you get me, young fellow?"

Bill did—Jack too, for the matter of that; for he smacked the American so violently on the back that Larry began to cough and looked at the burly sailor with some amount of indignation.

"You ain't got no call to do that, Jack," he spluttered. "No forcible argument of that sort ain't needed. Just say what you think of the suggestion."

"Think!" the burly sailor shouted. "Why, you couldn't have suggested anything that would ha' pleased me and the men we've got aboard better. If that there destroyer does get fully engaged by t'other—and it's too good a thing to think of—then what's to prevent us going head on for the trawler? Ain't we entitled to have our own action? What's to prevent us making her a prize, same as she'll try to make of us? Just you think what the boys back in Dover town 'ud think if we came sailing in with this 'ere boat, and another with a prize crew aboard her. They wouldn't half shout, would they?"

Even the phlegmatic Larry was forced to show some signs of enthusiasm. The very fact that this experienced sailor took up his idea so enthusiastically and approved of it was encouraging, and then who could escape the infection shed all around by the jovial enthusiastic Jack? The picture of the trawler steaming into Dover, a port to which Larry had never yet sailed, but which he could well imagine, the picture of the ship entering docks, the sides of which were lined with cheering soldiers and sailors and civilians, while behind her came that other trawler, no longer firing her gun,

but a captive with a prize crew steering her in—— Well, Larry could picture that, and at the thought grinned widely.

But as yet there was the destroyer to be thought of. Not that she was doing much harm to the trawler up to this moment, for the other trawler immediately in pursuit of our friends was steering a course which placed her across the line of fire from the destroyer, which, still at some considerable distance, was unable to get a clear field of fire. As a matter of fact her captain hesitated from fear of injuring the pursuing vessel. But a few minutes more would give a clear field of vision, and aboard the destroyer all was in readiness to open upon Bill and his friends. Under such a bombardment no doubt their vessel would have been rapidly blown to pieces.

"I'd best just get along and see what sort of boats we're carrying," said Jack, when he and his two companions had stared at the two destroyers for a few minutes. "That there German is gettin' into position to put a broadside into us, and, if that comes off, this vessel will sink inside five minutes. We may want to be off without stopping to think about it. Best get things ready then, so as to leave her."

He went off down the steps leading from the bridge and mustered the deck hands about him. Every one of the men was now armed with a weapon of some description. Some had rifles, others revolvers, while not a few carried boarding-axes. They trapesed off along the deck to where a couple of boats swung out from the davits, and having assured themselves that both were in readiness to be launched, and as yet undamaged, certain of them dived below in search of food and water to provision them. In the midst of their search they were recalled to the deck by Jack, who descended a few steps down the companion and bellowed at them.

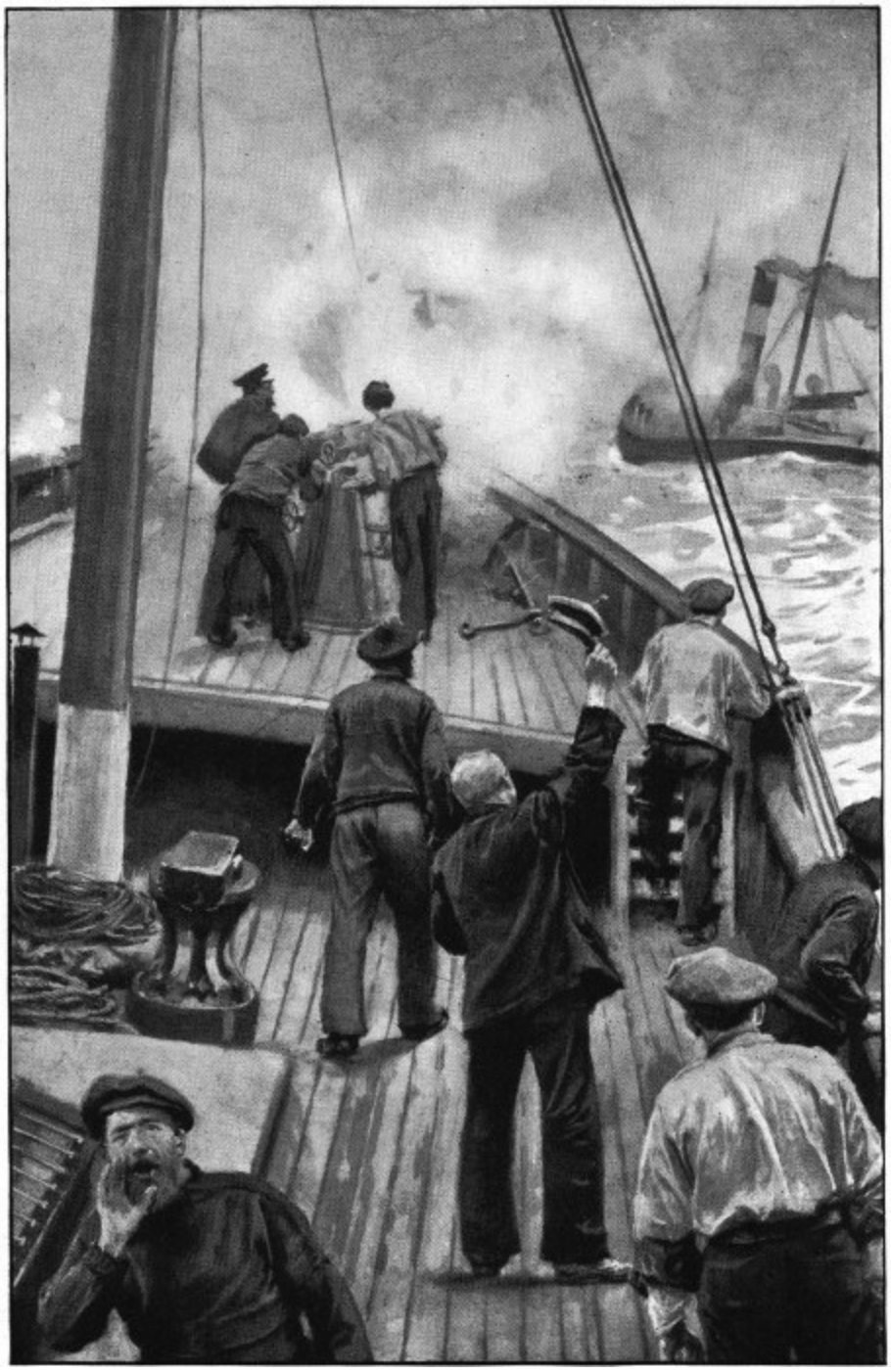
"Hi, lads, you come above again!" he yelled. "We're goin' to put ourselves on board the trawler. I wants every man that's got a rifle to come over here and take up a position; the chaps as has axes only'll lie down behind the bulwarks. When the time comes, every one of you goes over on to the other boat. Now, I tell you, we're goin' to take her!"

The men crowded round him yelling like maniacs. These whilom prisoners, so depressed but a short time before, who had given themselves up to the

thought of long incarceration in a German prison, were now filled with the highest spirits. They mustered on the deck brandishing their weapons, took up places which Jack assigned to them, and then, casting their eyes first at Bill and Larry on the bridge above, and then over the side at the trawler, they yelled themselves hoarse once more as they saw that their own vessel had turned about and was heading direct for their pursuer.

The man at the wheel, too, had caught something of their excitement, though he sat there impassive, steering the vessel with care and judgment, making ready to fling her alongside the other. As for the German trawler, great movement could be observed on her decks; men were rushing to and fro, while a figure on the bridge was gesticulating violently, though the words he shouted could not be heard. In any case, the gun in her bows, which had fired only a little while before, had ceased abruptly as Bill gave the order to swing his vessel round, and its crew had scuttled along the deck to join their comrades.

Not so the three who manned the gun aboard the ship on which our heroes were sailing. They waited only for their trawler to swing round, when they laid their gun on the other vessel, and then in rapid succession poured in shots, some of which screamed over her deck, while others holed her above the water, or crashed their way through her bulwarks scattering splinters along her decks. Indeed, it was the fire of these enthusiastic fellows which mainly beat down the resistance of the Germans. A lucky shot took away a portion of the bridge and killed the skipper, a splinter at the same time tearing the wheel from the hands of the man who steered the trawler and wrecking it. She swung off her course at once, while Bill's ship, conned by that impassive steersman before mentioned, swung round in a circle and headed so as to come alongside her.



A LUCKY SHOT TOOK AWAY A PORTION OF THE BRIDGE

"Just mark that wheel aft!" came in stentorian tones from Jack. "The last shot smashed the steering-gear on the bridge, and if we don't let 'em man the other gear they'll be helpless. Here you, Tom, and you, Charles, you

make it your business to see that no one goes near it! Boys, make ready to board the trawler!"

They waved their hands at him, those gallant sailors, they cheered him with vigour, and then, peering over the bulwarks, watching every movement, they waited eagerly for the moment when the two ships would grind together. They drew nearer. Figures aboard the hostile trawler were now clearly visible; men still raced to and fro. Now and again a rifle was fired, and a bullet could be heard as it pinged against the steel sides of the vessel. Two men rushed aft towards the steering-gear which Jack had pointed out to his comrades, and, reaching it, measured their length at once, shot down by those told off to fire in that direction.

Less than five minutes later the two vessels came together with a clang and a grinding crash, and instantly, before the men picked out by Jack to lash them together could get a hawser over the side, a number of the British sailors had scrambled from their own ship and gained the deck of the hostile trawler. They swept along it like an avalanche, beating down the resistance of the deck hands. They threw them down the companion-way, just as they had done with the crew of their own captured vessel. They shouted down the engine-room hatch, and in but a few brief minutes they had assembled the whole of the engine-room staff on the deck, and Jack could be seen haranguing them for all the world as if these Germans could understand all that he said. And, as he talked, Larry stood beside him, as nonchalant a figure as ever, chewing his cigar, vastly entertained by all the proceedings.

"You get in and talk to 'em, Jack," he said. "Just tell 'em all that's wanted. Ef they keep on working hard, and play the game and what not, well, all will be well with them; ef not—— Well, let 'em know what then."

Jack nodded, Jack actually grinned, then mopped the perspiration from his hot forehead. "I knows! See here, you—you—sons o' guns," he said, bellowing the words at the Germans, "you'll get straight down below. Savvy? You'll stoke and grease and carry on as you did before; and if you don't, well no one will be there to help you. This 'ere Tom will go along to watch things. Tom, you've got a gun, ain't you?"

Tom had. Tom was a tall and sinewy individual—as honest a British sailor as you could meet in a day's march, but one who, if he wished, could adopt

a sinister appearance. And sinister he looked now as he patted his rifle and glared at the prisoners. Then he held up one big battered forefinger and beckoned to them.

"You come right along here," he said. "You get right down below, double quick. Savvy! I'm comin' along behind you, don't you fear. You get in and carry on yer business. No," he added a moment later, shaking the same forefinger at one of the prisoners—a man with an evil cast of countenance, who glowered at him, "you ain't got no call to look at me like that. I'm harmless, I am! Only, just you take care of yourself, young feller! Just hop it, or things will begin to happen as won't be too comfortable for you!"

And "hop it" the German did. He and his comrades disappeared down the engine hatchway, with their tails between their legs, as you might say, and Tom, following, presently discovered them as hard at work and as diligent as those he had left on the other trawler. No doubt more than one of the engine staff would have willingly upset the running of the machinery had such a thing been easily effected and not so easily discovered, but the sturdy Tom, with his sinister glance, drove all thoughts of mutiny or double dealing out of his prisoners' heads. The rifle, on which he leaned so unconcernedly, and Tom's stern looks, sent these men about their business in a desperate hurry.

Meanwhile the lashings which had bound the two trawlers together had been cut adrift. Jim, extracted from the engine-room of the vessel he and his friends had captured, was now perched on what was left of the bridge of the other ship, and presently the two vessels were under way, heading this time out to sea towards the spot where the German destroyer had been steaming.

And what of her? What of the other boat which had been observed dashing towards the escaping trawler? The fight and the boarding of the trawler had occupied every bit of the attention of Bill and his friends. While it lasted it had been a breathless affair, and, though it was soon ended, the resistance of the German crew had not been altogether negligible. Indeed, the sturdy fellows whom Bill commanded had fought furiously for those few minutes, so furiously, in fact, that they failed to note the bang of guns in the offing, or to follow the movements of the two destroyers.

Now, as they steamed towards the spot, it was to discover the German boat down by the stern, afire for'ard, her funnels shot to ribbons, and her decks smashed, while steaming close to her was the other destroyer with a white ensign blowing out from her mast-head. Boats were being lowered, and as the two trawlers came upon the spot they discovered British sailors rescuing the German survivors of the enemy destroyer.

Imagine the shouts and the cheers to which Jack and his gallant friends gave vent. Imagine, if you can, the thrill of pride which went through Bill's frame as he rang the engine telegraph and stopped his machinery. It was the first big occasion in his life, and, like Jim and Larry and all the rest of them, he gloried in it.

"We couldn't ha' come into English waters in better shape," observed Larry that night as he sat on the deck and surveyed his surroundings, the boat having meanwhile made the port of Dover. "Here's England right beyond us and all round us. Yonder there's France. Listen a bit! Hear the guns, Bill? That's the British and French holding the line against the Germans. Well, we'll be there soon—eh?"

"We will," Bill and Jim echoed.

CHAPTER X
The European Conflict

Many and long were the discussions held by Jim and Bill and Larry now that they had reached the neighbourhood of the vast European conflict which had drawn America into its whirlpool. As they sat on their captured trawler at Dover they could literally hear the sound of that conflict in the distance; for across the Channel, but fifty miles inland, beyond Ypres—the celebrated Ypres, which had long since been shattered into fragments—British troops were fighting their way along the ridge of Paschendaele. Messines, the German stronghold, had fallen. British guns, made in British factories manned by British women, had smashed the Hun defences.

Consider this achievement for a while. In 1914 Britain possessed guns sufficient only for a small expeditionary force, and the supply none too liberal. In 1915 her manufacturing resources were sufficient to supply guns for an increasing host of volunteers—guns and every other munition necessary for the conduct of warfare. But the business of manufacturing weapons and all that appertains to fighting was not yet by any means fully expanded. Indeed, the need for it was not apparent. The call for shells, more shells, and still more shells, and for guns by the hundred to project them, had not yet gone through the land, nor had munition factories sprung up in every direction with the rapidity of mushrooms.

Then came the Ministry of Munitions—a huge Government concern inaugurated to control supplies for every kind of warfare. It commenced its work perhaps hesitatingly, it forged ahead with determination, it got fully into its stride; so that when 1916 arrived, and Britain and France faced the German in Picardy across the Somme valley, British guns, aye, and British men, were the masters of the situation.

And here was 1917 with still more men and with a still mightier array of munitions, deluging the German, bruising him all along the line through Flanders into France, smashing him and his defences, driving him from the

ridges which he had held since 1914, and from which he had looked down upon the British troops floundering in the mud in Flanders.

To the Kaiser and his ruthless agents, to the German High Command as it is termed, those days must have seemed portentous. Disaster hung in the air, the fortune which had favoured them from the first instant seemed to have departed from them altogether. The Central Powers were in fact girt in by enemies. The world had declared war against these land and sea marauders. America had joined the Allies, having suffered indignities at the hands of the Kaiser; Portugal had joined the ranks of Prussia's enemies; and states in South America were already considering their position, or were now throwing in their lot with those sworn to beat down the oppressors of mankind and to fight for the freedom of nations.

The Dardanelles was an old tale. Britain had there left her mark, and the graves of her sons, and had departed. In Egypt the tribes haunting the Delta of the Nile, stirred up by German agents and supplied with money and with weapons, had revolted and had been subjugated by British columns. The Senussi, to take an example, were now conquered. Across the Canal, and far to the east of it, Turkish hosts gathered in Beersheba, Jerusalem, and other places were watching the steady relentless advance of a British railway across the desert, and, as Bill and his friends reached European waters, troops of the King-Emperor were already on the fringe of Palestine, where very soon they were to advance by Beersheba, Hebron, Bethlehem, and other places of Biblical interest, and were to hoist their flag over the ancient and sacred walls of Jerusalem, once the home of historical crusaders.

Farther east lay Mesopotamia, where the forced surrender of General Townshend's gallant troops at Kut had long since been avenged by the capture of that place and the taking of Bagdad. The noble-hearted Sir Stanley Maude was already leading his forces up the Tigris and Euphrates towards Mosul, and, though in later months that dread scourge cholera seized him, there were others to step into his place and still lead British and Indian troops onwards.

Glance to the eastern area of Europe. If matters wore a rosy aspect on the French front, in Egypt, Salonica, and Mesopotamia, if along those lengths of British trench-lines British guns and British troops were causing the

Prussian to reel, the Turks to surrender, and the Bulgarians to wish perhaps that they had never joined hands with the Kaiser and his soldiers, to the east of Europe Russian troops were reeling from another reason altogether.

Revolution was in the air; the rights of man were being preached and practised in preference to patriotism and unselfish devotion to country; upstarts were springing into position; subtle agents of the Kaiser, their pockets heavy with German gold, had seized upon the ear of the ignorant people; soldiers turned against their officers; the working and the peasant class were induced first to oppose and then to throw off allegiance to those who had been their lords and masters. Anarchy supervened, though for a time the revolutionists, holding those who would carry matters to great lengths, attempted to form a Government and control the country, even attempted to keep the soldiers in the trenches and to stem the German invasion; until anarchy reared its head still higher, the voices of Trotsky and Lenin overpowered the voices of the moderates. The Tsar and his house had been removed, and were, in fact, prisoners; the government of the people, on behalf of the people, was destroyed. Trotsky and Lenin became, in fact, the rulers of the country, and they, be it understood, were already more than half given over to Germany. Trenches were abandoned, soldiers gave themselves leave and went off to their distant homes, a few faithful and patriotic divisions were left stranded; guns by the hundred and munitions of every description—for the most part supplied by Britain—lay at the mercy of any German battalion that cared to come for them.

The inevitable followed. German troops advanced and seized wide tracts of country. They took, with only the trouble of taking it, vast masses of military booty; they imposed peace terms on the Russians which practically made slaves of them; and, with their accustomed cunning, so handled matters that this huge country, once tenanted by a patriotic people, became dissolved into separate provinces, each claiming its own sovereignty, the one already engaged in warfare against the other, careless of the fact that the conqueror was already knocking at their doors.

That was the position which faced the line when Jim and Bill and Larry came upon the scene. Our eastern ally, who had held masses of Germans and Austrians, and bid fair with proper organization and generalship to march into Austria, and perhaps into the Kaiser's territory, suddenly went

out of the conflict, leaving Germany and Austria free to withdraw their troops and throw them upon the French and British in the west and upon the Italians. The situation was more than serious. Already, in fact, Italy had suffered a serious reverse, and had been driven from the line along the River Izonso, which she had captured, right back to the Piave.

There again German cunning and Austrian duplicity had had much to do with this loss of territory and of soldiers. Lies had been spread, gullible subjects of King Victor had listened to and had disseminated tales which robbed some of their comrades of their patriotic valour. Thus, when the ground was fully prepared, a secret massing of the Austrians and Germans allowed strong forces to be flung upon our Italian ally. The line reeled; where the poisonous lies of the Germans had penetrated, it broke, it fell back, in places it surrendered. The whole line then was forced to retire, but, thanks to the valour of the majority of the Italians, to the patriotism of King Victor's army, a rear-guard action was fought which saved the situation, though for a time the position was precarious, so precarious, in fact, that British and French troops were rushed to Italy to stem this invasion.

And now the end of 1917 was at hand. What had 1918 in prospect for Britain and her allies? The line in France, stretching from Dunkerque to Verdun and so to Belfort, bristled with men and weapons. Opposite it lay the German line packed with an increasing throng of soldiers, while guns and every implement of warfare, now no longer needed on the Russian front, were being massed, preparatory to the biggest conflict the world has ever witnessed.

But not yet had the blow fallen. A comparative calm existed along the front —the calm before the storm which was undoubtedly brewing. It was this period of the war which found Bill and his friends stepping from the steamer at Boulogne, about to take their places in the ranks of the Allies.

"Hello, boys!" someone greeted them as they halted on the quay and looked about them. "Come over—eh?"

"Yep," Larry answered laconically, shaking hands with this undoubted specimen of American citizenship, and then casting his eyes round once more, for he could never tire of the hum and bustle which existed all round him.

What with railway trucks being slowly shunted towards the water-side, what with the vessel then busily unloading, the big station and its restaurant, alive with officers and men, with blue-frocked porters, hospital nurses, and every variety of human being; with the quay farther along stacked high with boxes and bales and parcels of every sort and description, more ships, motor-cars, motor-ambulances, a shrieking locomotive, soldiers, sailors, and civilians, women and children and babies, the place was a seething mass of movement, backed by the hills beyond, and the picturesque town of Boulogne climbing towards the summit. It was quite a little time, in fact, before either Larry or Bill or Jim could give much attention to the person who had accosted them. They found him a tall, raw-boned, thin, American non-commissioned officer.

"Names!" he snapped, and they gave them.

"Ah! I've heard of you. They sent me a chit through from London. You've come right here to get trained. How's that? Why not do your training in the camps in America?"

They told him—Larry in his jerky, short, abrupt and smiling manner; Jim, serious, rather monosyllabic, having to have the details dragged out of him; Bill impulsively, as one might expect of such a youth, yet modestly enough. Then the Sergeant stopped them and clapped a big, brawny hand on Bill's shoulder.

"I've heard of you. Gee!" he cried, and pushed the young fellow away from him so as to study him the better. "So you three are Larry and Jim and Bill, and, say, what did you do with the trawler?"

"Trawler!" Larry gaped, Jim gaped, Bill looked astonished.

"Aye, trawler! D'you think we're such dunces over here that we don't know what's going on? Just you wait! Look at this—a *communiqué* which was issued last night—see it?

"'Gallant affair in the North Sea. British prisoners on board a German trawler overpower crew and conduct a fight with another trawler. German torpedo-boat destroyer intervenes, but assistance arrives at the critical moment in the shape of a British destroyer. The escaped prisoners capture the other trawler and steam her in with the help of their prisoners. The two

trawlers reach the roads at Dover quite safely. This feat is mainly the work of three men from America—Larry——'"

"Here, hold hard!" cried Larry, pushing his head forward, "you're romancing—eh? Gee! It's truth! Well I——!"

The big Sergeant shouted his laughter and pointed a finger at the diminutive Larry.

"True? I should say it was! So you are the three! Come right along. I've quarters for you, and you can get some food and then sit down and give me the whole yarn. To-morrow you'll go up country and then start in at the business of training."

Three days later the three had reached a spot some fifteen miles from the front line, where they were at once posted to a Franco-American transport unit.

"You'll have to learn the work with horses first of all," they were told, "after that there is the motor traction part of it. Yes, you'll see some of the front. In a day or two you'd be sent with one of the convoys taking ammunition up. It's exciting work sometimes, boys," the Sergeant continued. "When shelling's severe, the chaps that take up food and such like, see things, or rather feel 'em. But you've been under gun-fire—eh! Don't tell me! Ain't I seen the news about the trawler?"

So he had seen it too, others also, for the advent of the three to this Franco-American unit was the signal for quite an outpouring of questions. The very first night indeed, as Larry puffed tranquilly at his cigar, a big American finger was pointed at him, while there sat round the circle with their American brothers a number of blue-coated *poilus*, likewise attached to the unit.

"Oui! Bien!" one of them said, shrugging his shoulders expressively; "Larry, Jim, Beill! A-ha! Ve knows sem! Ve 'ave 'eard seir names many time. You come out wis see story now—hey! Dat is bien!"

Larry blew a cloud of smoke at him, Jim fidgeted, Bill felt really like bolting; to stand upon the bridge of the trawler under gun-fire had been one thing, to sit there under this battery of eyes with questions being flung at

them, bursting all round them as it were, was quite a different experience and a greater ordeal to our heroes.

"See here," drawled Larry at length, turning an expressive and somewhat dirty thumb in Jim's direction, "he's the scholar of our crew, he'll spout. Jim, you get in at it. 'Sides, you speak French a little, you told us so on our way over; give it 'em in French and English together."

It was true enough that Jim, in a moment of enthusiasm, and when feeling confidential, had informed his chums that he was quite a considerable French speaker; but now he seemed to have forgotten the occurrence. He shook his head quite angrily, shook a fist at the grinning Larry, and mopped a streaming forehead. So it devolved on Bill to tell of their experiences, which he did quite modestly, interjecting a word or two of French now and again; for, if Jim were dumb, he at least had heard something in his schooldays and was, as a matter of fact, quite a fair linguist.

"Then you ain't got no call to feel scared about going up to the line," said their Sergeant when the tale was finished. "You three did mighty well. There's Americans as reached France in advance of our fighting units in queer ways. Some of 'em come over as stowaways, some sneaked across in perhaps more open fashion. I know a chap what got took on as a German nootral in Noo York. What, don't know what a German nootral is? Well that is some! A German nootral, chaps, is a man what's absolutely nootral; he don't care nothing for one side nor t'other. But he happens to have been born of German parents. They've likely as not settled in America this many years back, and have made pots of money under the old stars and stripes. They're grateful, they are! they've brought up their son to feel grateful too! He speaks German, of course, and equally of course he's nootral, that is when he's speakin' open and above-board; but behind the scenes he's as German as the Kaiser. He'd down America and the very boys that he went to school with. He's out for planting 'Kultur' round the whole world. He looks for a Germany that'll spread across England and away over the Atlantic to Noo York, Washington, and Philadelphia. Shucks! He's about as nootral as I am! He's just a born traitor! This here pal of mine was all that I've said, only he wasn't a traitor, he was just artful and burning keen to get over. So he takes on as I said as a German nootral on a nootral boat that wasn't any more nootral than a German. He hoodwinked the crowd, got across, and slipped

ashore in England; in twenty-four hours he was over here. He's laid back o' the churchyard over yonder, he is. Harvey Pringle was his name—you'll see it chalked up on the cross on his grave. He was a man, was Harvey Pringle."

The big Sergeant blew his nose violently, stared at Larry in quite a pugnacious way, lit a pipe with considerable display of energy, and spat a little aggressively. It was American feeling; it was the only way in which this sturdy fellow would allow his feelings to vent themselves. Larry knew what he meant; Jim and Bill realized that he had lost a friend almost before he mentioned the churchyard; their French comrades, quick in feeling and understanding, glanced at one another, exclaimed, and lit their pipes as if in sympathy with the Sergeant.

"Well, boys," the latter went on when he had smoked for a little while in silence, "you've come over in fine style, and you'll do fine. We can't have too many boys of your sort. Anyways, we're glad to see you."

It was three nights later when the three chums joined a convoy which moved out of the camp with its laden wagons for the trench line, where, for the first time, they were to experience warfare as it was just then in France.

CHAPTER XI
On Convoy Duty

A moon, half risen and not yet full, lit up the surroundings as the supply column drew away from the village where Bill and his friends had their head-quarters. The road wound away from them pale and ghost-like, a ribbon of shimmering greenish-white, once shaded by trees, the stumps of which alone remained. Woods cropped their green heads up here and there, a stream tinkled in the immediate neighbourhood, and all around lay a blue-green waste over which moonbeams played gently.

"Pipes out!" came the order. "Young Bill, you'll come along with this French sergeant; you can call him any name you like, he'll answer to it. Do as he says all the time and you won't get into trouble. Larry, you come along with me; Jim's fixed with another Frenchman. I needn't tell you that no matches must be struck, and when we get a couple of miles nearer not one of you must speak above a whisper. If heavy shelling starts you'll carry on just the same until further orders."

Bill climbed to the seat beside the driver of the wagon to which the Sergeant had pointed, and found himself reared well above the column, able to look right along it. There for an hour he was jolted and jarred as the vehicles were pulled northward, and there he listened to the chatter of the men and to the clatter of the horses' hoofs as they trod the highway. Far away in the distance guns spoke; nearer at hand at times there were louder clashes as French guns answered. More than once the hum of an engine could be heard; far overhead and soaring upwards he caught a fleeting glimpse of an aeroplane hurrying to its destination. Once, too, a still period was of a sudden broken by the sharp tattoo of a machine-gun up in the trenches, followed by silence which was almost painful.

"Just a little 'do'," the Frenchman told him. "Oh yes, *mon ami*, I speaks the American well, but you—ah! *Je me rappelle!* you—you—speak French beautifully."

It was just the politeness of the Frenchman; indeed Bill was to find the friendly and gallant *poilu* a boon companion, and the few hours he spent with this soldier made him feel the warmest friendship for him.

"What's that?" he asked a little later, as the pale rays of the moon were put in the shade by a brilliant conflagration which lit up the sky ahead and made every horse, every vehicle, and every driver stand out boldly silhouetted against the ground.

"Very lights! Listen to the machine-gun again! Someone's restless up there; perhaps it's the Boche suffering from toothache and strolling out in 'No-Man's-Land'. My comrades of France always shoot when a Boche is in sight. They do not forget the invaded districts of France, my friend! They do not forget Belgium! *Pardieu!* They do not love the Boche! No, not at all, *mon ami*. Ah, it has died down! Now we shall push on, for we are within one and a half miles of the trenches."

They clattered on their way steadily; behind them came other columns, and presently they found themselves driving abreast with another which had emerged from a side road. Under those mysterious beams they pushed forward along the road, a collection of vehicles containing all that makes war possible to an army; bread and meat, and bacon and coffee, and wine, and such-like articles; trench stores, rifles, ammunition, barbed wire, and poison gas apparatus; shells for the soixante-quinze, the famous French quick-firer; shells for the howitzers; and in bigger and stronger vehicles, which were motor-propelled, shells for other guns, of larger calibre, which had been pushed up towards the trench-line. Then the column halted.

"Here we go straight on while the others branch off to various rendezvous," said the driver. "Do you find it a queer sensation, this driving at night with the trench-line in front, knowing that there are men there stretched on either hand for miles upon miles—yes, for four hundred miles—American, British, Portuguese, Belgian; and opposite them the Boche—the hated Boche? Do you realize, *mon ami*, that on every road along that four hundred miles at this very moment similar convoys are pushing up stores to be carried to the trenches, and that on the far side of 'no-man's-land' the same is going forward? For the Boche also must replenish the stomachs and the ammunition dumps of his soldiers. Poof, you will say, it is all wasted

labour! That all this ammunition will be fired into the air, and that, being fired, it will cause more waste, for it will kill people! But is it waste? *Mon Dieu! Non!* It is spent for the freedom of all nations. This pouring out of shells and blood, though some of it is thrown to the winds in these days, will bring forth fruit in the future; for it will see the defeat of the Germans and the downfall of Prussian militarism, and will find France mightier than ever, Britain the Queen of Empires, and America—well, America refined by the fire through which she has passed, nobler than at the moment. The price, my friend? Well, it appears high—outrageously high—in our day; posterity will realize that it was not too high for the liberty it purchased.

"But there, I am romancing. I think in these night hours, I think of my country saddened by its losses, of yours, and of Britain and our other allies. I wish that this war had not been, but, being a philosopher, I see that it was inevitable. And the Boche, does he wish that it had never been? Bah! Ask him! It was a bad day for the Kaiser when he let loose his soldiers. An easy conquest was then promised. Does it look easy now? Will he achieve triumph? Never! Even if he were to do so it would be to discover a shattered, broken Germany. Ah, here we are at the rendezvous! Now we halt and feed our horses; presently the fatigue parties from the trenches will come down and then our stuff will be taken."

A little later a ghostly line of men appeared out of nothingness as it were; they were challenged by the officer commanding the convoy, and soon, laden with material for themselves and their comrades, went trudging off again under the moonbeams, making for the entrance to the communicating-trench which led to the front line.

"Heigh ho! a good job done!" said the *poilu* as he picked up his reins again. "Get along to the leaders, my friend, and help to turn them, for these roads are narrow for steering a cart of this sort round. Another half-hour and we shall be able to light pipes. My word, this night work costs the country something in tobacco!"

Not a shot, not a shell of any description, had come near the convoy so far, and in fact the front line, illuminated quite brilliantly a little while before, and stirred to some movement, as evidenced by the rattle of machine-guns, had now sunk as it were into blissful slumber. Even the Very lights failed to

illuminate the sky. It looked as though the two armies had decided upon a truce until the morning. But not so! Some ten minutes later there came the boom of distant guns, and then a screech ending in a loud detonation.

"Hum!" thought Bill. "Heard that sort of thing before! Shrapnel—and not very far away either."

"Just ahead. You can hear the bullets dropping on the roadway," the *poilu* answered, pointing. "It's just a strafe; they know, as we know, that convoys occupy the roads at night, and every now and again they send over a feeler. If they have luck—poof! it is uncomfortable for some of us. But then, so also for the Boche; for if he shells, so do we also. Besides, there are the aeroplanes; they swoop down on the roads. A week ago the Boche had the impudence to attack us, but we hurried under some trees, and in the darkness he lost us. But, plague take the Boche, there are more shells! He is wakeful! It must be the man with the toothache again, for listen to the machine-guns. Bother the man! Why does he not go to the doctor?"

Bill could hear him chuckling. That the Frenchman was undisturbed by the shells now sailing over the country-side was quite evident. He did not even duck his head as one played over the convoy and ricochetted from the road perhaps a hundred yards in advance. If his features had been clearly visible, his eyebrows would have been seen to lift as if he were vastly astonished when another one spluttered shrapnel to the left of the convoy. He even laughed when one plunged into the ground not ten yards away.

"It's always so," he said quite quietly. "You've heard, my friend, that the bullet does not strike you which has not your number on it. It is a great joke, I tell you; my number—my regimental number—is so great that I doubt the bullet was never made that can hold it. But a shell. Ah! that is different—eh? We can smoke now—*bien*! That is a comfort."

Bill might have found it a comfort too if he had taken yet to smoking; instead, he sat perched up beside this cool Frenchman, listening to his words, turning his head round to watch the bursting shells, and listening to others which hurtled through the air at a distance.

"Uncanny, yes!" he told himself. "It makes one rather feel inclined to shiver, as if a jug of cold water were being poured slowly down one's back. But

yes, it is something to be a philosopher, only difficult under such conditions. Somehow it's so different from what it was on the trawler; then everything was movement, hurry, rush, with fighting to be expected; here it's all so peaceful—er—except for the shells."

It was peaceful in its own way, though dangerous enough as many have already discovered; yet, to do him justice, Bill never flinched, and indeed rather enjoyed the whole experience.

"A man gets used to it," said the Sergeant, when they got back to their quarters, having in the meanwhile surreptitiously obtained a report on Bill and his two chums. "You three fellows were not, of course, expected to mind shelling after that trawler affair; but you can take my word for it, son, that shelling gets on a man's nerves even when he thinks he's used to it. You may go up to the trenches night after night; sometimes there's not a shot fired; then you come in for a burst of it and things are lively. If you don't, every odd gun that sounds in your ear may have a shell for you—you're listening for it, expecting it; it's almost as bad as a strafe same as I've been talkin' of. Now, young shaver, you turn in! Precious soon you may be takin' your own convoy up."

Less than a month had passed when Bill was actually driving one of the convoy carts, Larry and Jim being placed in similar responsible positions. Then each got a step in rank and became lance-corporal, and finally, when a few weeks had passed, were full sergeants. Just about then it happened they were transferred from the Franco-American unit to one of the new units working with the American army, which was now swelling visibly and increasing in numbers.

"We're off to the Somme area," Larry said. "Say now, ain't that the place where British chaps fought the Huns somewheres about 1916, when America wasn't yet in the war, and when the President was still tryin' to keep us out of it? Guess it would want a lot of keepin' us out of it now! What was it they said when we came in?—'in with both feet'—eh? Gee. It's more than our feet we're putting into this business."

They went by road to Amiens, where the famous Cathedral overshadows the ancient city, soon to be the objective of the Germans; then they turned due east and rode to Peronne, where, to their amazement, to Bill's huge

delight and none the less to the satisfaction of Larry and Jim, they found themselves billeted next to British troops and their unit actually attached to a British division.

"It's getting a sorter mix-up, boys," a friend of theirs explained. "Way north there's Belgians and French and British sorter mixed up together; then there's Portuguese and British and French again sorter mixed up and jumbled lower down; there's us and more British and French, and then more Americans, all of 'em facin' the Hun and ready for him. Folks say as how he's about to start a big offensive. There's hundreds of thousands of German troops on t'other side of 'No Man's Land'. For that we've got to thank the Revolutionists in Russia—or rather, a chap should say, the Bolshevists—who, I reckon, are sorter super-Socialists, and are agin' the law and agin' everything as the Irish might say. Well, we're watching for Mr. Hun and his offensive."

"And meanwhile we go on learning our own particular job with motor transport," said Bill, for this part of the work entrusted to him and his friends interested him even more than that of the horsed transport. "You seem to be able to do so much more with motors; you can go so much faster and farther, and the loads you carry are so much heavier. Then, too, our job is to take up shells; and when you hear the guns shying them over at the Huns you somehow feel that you're doing better work than you were beforehand. An offensive—eh, Larry? Wonder where it'll start? I did hear that this front might be attacked."

"Guess the Hun wants to win back the line the British and French took from him in the Somme offensive," Jim said. "You see, he was lying then just east of Albert and pretty nigh within easy shot of Amiens; then he got pushed back right away past Fricourt and Pozières and other historical places, till his line was so broken and his defences so upset that he made a forced retirement after the battle was over, clearing out of Bapaume, Peronne, and Noyon to mention a few of the places. It must have shook him up a little that offensive of our allies, and if he's made up his mind to recapture the ground, well it ain't wonderful."

"Not when you come to remember the fact that the Russians are out of this business altogether," declared Larry with a curl of his lip; for somehow or

other the downfall of the great Muscovite nation, the refusal of the soldiers there to fight, and the upheaval and revolution which had undermined the strength of the country, roused something like contempt. "There ain't no longer need for Germans in the east nor for Austrians either; a few battalions marching here and there are quite enough to occupy the country and to bully and overawe the people. Meanwhile the Kaiser is moving every man-jack he can find into France. Folks says that the railways are worn-out with transporting guns and men; and yonder, just over there"—and standing up the diminutive Larry stretched out a hand to the country beyond Peronne, where the German lines were—"somewhere yonder there are masses of the enemy, masses of guns too, I dare say, thousands of gas shells, trench mortars, bombs, and every sort of implement, all being stored and made ready for the day when the Germans will fling themselves upon Britons and French and Belgians and Americans, not to mention Portuguese and others who are fighting on the Western Front. It will be a terrific combat."

Yet days went by, settled weather arrived, and the end of March was already approaching. Those were days of beautiful sunlight, when men began to think of throwing off the hairy waistcoats with which the British soldier is provided, when greatcoats were discarded during the daytime, and when men sniffed at the breeze, scented the spring flowers, and thought of summer. But at night cold winds played over the ground, and the earth, in which so many thousands were living, dug deeply into it, struck chill and cold, and, as the early hours of morning came, condensed the moisture. Then the country-side was obscured in damp, wet fog, which hid the combatants from one another, hid, indeed, all but the sound of guns, which thundered here and there along the battle line.

For days past, indeed, gun-fire had been a feature along the front; it broke out here and there with violence; it subsided, perhaps, only to burst into double fury at an adjacent point; while for some hours now the enemy artillery had been thudding over a wide stretch, and the Allied guns had been answering shot for shot, so that there was pandemonium. Then, in the early hours of the 21st March, German masses were suddenly launched through the dense fog which still clad the country-side, and threw themselves with desperate fury upon the British Third and Fifth Armies.

CHAPTER XII
Germany's Greatest Effort

It was cold and raw as Bill put his head up from the dug-out where he and his chums had their head-quarters.

"Something doin'," he said laconically, bobbing down again and clambering to the depths below, where in 1915 the Germans had dug hard to prepare a defensive line which would arrest the British forces.

Yet that contemptible force, as the Kaiser had arrogantly called it, swollen to unwonted proportions, had overrun this line in spite of strenuous German resistance, and here, in March, 1918, in place of the Hun enjoying such comfort as these dug-outs provided—here were Bill and his friends snug under cover.

"Somethin' doin'," Bill repeated, as he joined the throng down below, some thirty-five feet under the surface, and stumbled in to find a seat in the dug-out, about which sat or lounged, perhaps, a dozen men facing the centre, where, perched on a kerosene tin, a single army-pattern candle spluttered and glimmered.

"Oh, aye!" answered one, as he pulled at his pipe. "Sounds like it! Shouldn't wonder!"

They listened. Each man, as if by habit, lifted his head and stared hard at the spluttering candle.

"Yep!" Larry interjected, pulling his hat from his head and rubbing his fingers through his hair. "It do sound something like a ruction. This here gunnin's been goin' on this four hours. Say, Bill, what's it doin' upstairs?"

"Aye, what's it doin'?"

They turned their eyes upon the young soldier, and then sat there still staring at the fluttering flame of the candle, listening, listening to the thud, thud, thud, the almost continuous roar of distant guns—damped down, as it

were, by their deeply entrenched position, yet a roar for all that—and listening to the distant reverberation, which shook the earth and sent tremors through the dug-out.

For hours, indeed, German guns had been thundering; for hours shells of every variety, but mainly gas shells, had been crashing into the British defences, and crashing upon roads, levelling all that was left of the puny walls of one-time pleasant hamlets, creating more destruction in an area already almost utterly destroyed by previous bombardments. And to those guns British guns made answer, till the roar made speaking well-nigh impossible even deep down there in that dug-out.

"Best get something to eat, boys," said the practical Jim, when a few minutes had passed in silence—that is, silence save for that interminable thud, the occasional whine of a shell scarcely perceptible deep down in the dug-out, and the deep rumbling of the earth caused by so many concussions. "It looks as if the Germans are coming on, and, that being so, the man who's got his waistcoat well lined will be ready for them. Ah! hear that one? That's an ammunition dump gone up! Hit direct, I shouldn't wonder."

They had been almost deafened by a rumbling roar, and sat for a while again in silence, then from an adjoining opening there emerged a tin-hatted, hairy individual bearing a dixie in one hand and a ladle in the other. It was the cook—a stalwart British Tommy, his muffler wound round his face, a cigarette between his lips, the very embodiment of coolness and nonchalance.

"Food, boys!" he called out, "and maybe it's the last we'll get down in this dug-out. With all that fire comin' over, it ain't possible that we shall advance, and from what I've sorter gathered we'll be lucky if we can hold our ground. There's millions of Germans. The Kaiser's been bringin' 'em over from Russia all the time, and I expects that 'e's been bringin' all the guns and ammunition that the Russians left to 'im. 'Ere you are, Bill, hold yer plate! Good bully and stew with a potato or two a-floatin' around. You won't turn yer nose up at it, I know, nor Larry neither. I don't know America, but I guess there couldn't be anything better put before you out there—eh, Larry?"

"Yep! You bet! Feedin' ain't no better and no worse out there, and it'll never be better than it is here," the American answered, sniffing at the stew and smacking his lips.

Indeed he spoke the truth, for never were soldiers better fed than those belonging to Britain. They ate their stew with relish, those men down in that deep well of the earth, and then fell to smoking and to chatting, while Bill clambered along flights of steep wooden steps till he came to the gas curtain which hung across the exit, and, keeping his gas respirator at the "alert" position, ready to pop the mask over his face at any instant, he pushed the curtain aside, and, helmet on head, emerged into the open. It was light—that is to say, it was lighter than it had been three hours earlier, though a damp, wet fog clung to the ground. Gun-fire still sounded, but for some uncanny reason its fierceness had subsided; though now, in place of the heavy thuds of distant batteries and the bursting of shells, there was to be heard the sharp, crisper report of smaller explosive missiles.

"Trench mortars, shouldn't wonder," he thought, "and that's rifle-fire, machine-gun firing, and it's spreading all along the line! It's—— by James! it's behind us! It's close here to our left! It's—— who are they?"

He peered through the mist, and then, lifting the curtain, dived down the steps of the dug-out, reaching his friends eventually in a confused heap, for he had missed his footing on the damp stairway.

"Why, it's our little Bill," chaffed Larry, and then looked serious, for Bill sat up, his clothes awry, his helmet dangling in one hand, his eyes starting.

"They're Huns—Huns I tell you! They're all round us! They've got behind us! Our men have fallen back. It's been a surprise attack, and the mist and the fog have helped them. It's—it looks as though we're cornered."

"Cornered! Cornered! Looks as though we're cornered," they repeated, the words coming to Bill's ears as if from a far distance, first with a decided flavour of the American accent, then in broad Devonshire, and again from Jim in that drawl which was so unmistakable. "Cornered!"

"Yep!"

"But," said Larry, diving for his morsel of cigar, "you don't mean——?"

"I mean," said Bill, "that the Germans are all round us, that we chaps down here are probably cut off, and that we're in a tight fix. Where's yer rifles? Where's yer bombs? Some of you men have got a store of bombs down here that you were to carry up to the front line, and what about ammunition stocks? This is a business! Look here, boys, make ready whilst I go up and have another look round. The thing to do would be to decide which way to go, how to act if we are surrounded. We shall be made prisoners the moment we turn out, or get shot down. I'm not asking to be made a prisoner —not me!"

"Nor me neither," came from the burly individual who had borne the steaming dixie into the dug-out, "nor me neither, Bill. I had some!" he added, and he actually grinned in spite of the precariousness of their situation. "Don't yer forgit, young feller, that in 1915 I was took at Hulloch, opposite Loos, you know—no yer don't, 'cos you was in America; but Hulloch's just where we gave the Hun proper stuff somewhere about September, 1915. Well, I got pinched, and for about a week I was a guest of the Kaiser's. Oh, no thanks! No more being a guest of the Kaiser nor of any other Hun, I thank you. Skilly ain't in it—I give yer my word, I was worn wellnigh to a shadow—I——"

The incorrigible, loquacious fellow would have gone on discussing the event for half an hour had not Bill abruptly interrupted him, while another of the men brusquely ended his conversation.

"Stow it, Nobby! You as thin as a rake, eh? You'll be thin soon if you don't hold yer wind and help us to get out of what looks like a nasty business. Yes, young Bill, you nip up, me and the other boys'll make ready."

"And I'll go along with him," said Jim, making towards the stairway.

They clambered up rapidly, Jim adjusting his gas respirator. Then, arrived at the gas curtain, they pulled it slowly aside and peered out. It was lighter still, for every minute now made a difference. Mounting higher overhead was the spring sun, though still invisible, yet sucking continuously at the moisture, driving deep lanes through it, trying all the while to send its rays to the soaked earth underneath. There were figures moving about, a batch of men disarmed and dressed in khaki were being marched across the narrow foreground; officers dressed in field grey—the German uniform—were

galloping to and fro, and a host of men were staggering past bearing machine-guns and trench mortars. It was a German invasion in fact. For the German hosts, seizing the opportunity provided by mist, had taken the British Fifth Army at a disadvantage, and, coming on by the thousand, had swept through their front line and were already hotly engaged with other troops farther to the rear. In that sudden, successful advance they had overwhelmed small parties of the British, they had run over trenches and advanced posts and dug-outs, and, in fact, they had erected a curtain between those men in the front line who had been unable to fall back, and their comrades now resisting the enemy advance.

In that area which they had so suddenly captured lay the dug-out in which Bill and his friends were quartered, and they too, like many another party, were derelict, surrounded, encompassed by enemies, with no way out, though as yet they were not actually prisoners.

"Huh!" grunted Bill, peering from beneath the flap of the blanket, "it don't look healthy—do it? A fellow don't know which way to turn nor what to do. If we wait, we are taken. There'll be a party of Germans come along and summon us to surrender. Then it would be a case of 'hands up' and 'come out'—or——"

"Be burst in by a bomb," said Jim. "I know it! I went up with a party of our chaps in one of those raids of ours when we blew up some of the German dug-outs. My, it was a game!"

They lowered the gas curtain over the entrance again and stumbled down the stairway.

"Yes, it was a game," said Jim, as they entered the dug-out and joined their comrades. "A game for the Huns, you bet! Gee! and we wouldn't find it so."

The big man in the hairy waistcoat, with the broad smile on his strong face, grinned, and, taking the cigarette from his mouth, tapped Larry familiarly on the shoulder.

"A game I've played too, up here in these very parts in the days when we was fighting the Germans back over the Somme. Kamerad! D'you know the call? They'd come tumbling up from the dug-outs, with their hands above their heads, and, if you believe me, they'd offer money, watches, anything,

for their lives, boys. We gave 'em somethin' that time. Of course, if they didn't come up we gave 'em a smoke-bomb; and if that didn't fix 'em we put a sentry at the door and waited till a chap came along with something stronger."

"Hold hard! Sentry! Oh!" Bill shouted.

"Oh!" repeated the big man; "and what's now? You ain't frightened?"

"Frightened!" glared Larry. For the very thought sent him into a hot flush of indignation. "Him!—Bill!—the chap——"

"Shut up!" said Bill. "I was thinking of that sentry. We're cornered—that's what all agreed—eh?"

Even the big man in the hairy waistcoat could not fail to be in sympathy with the suggestion. If he had, a glance out through the door of the dug-out would have soon satisfied him. The light was now stronger. The mist was clearing. On every side Germans could be seen, while behind them, where there had been British support-lines before, was now the fierce rattle of machine-guns and of trench mortars. Across what had been "No-Man's-Land" streamed columns of Germans, some marching in good order, others trapesing over the ground dragging every sort of war material. There were detached bands, too, marching hither and thither, and halting unexpectedly. They were searching for the hidden caches of British soldiers, cut off by this sudden advance, and for dug-outs.

"Hold hard!" said Bill. "You chaps wait down here. Larry and Jim come along up with me. I'm going to post a sentry over our show," he said, when they had gained the curtain and were able to peep out. "Perhaps we'll get a chance."

"A chance!" said Larry, scratching his head—"a chance to place a sentry! You mean a chance to get hold of some togs in which to rig one of us up. That's a fine idea, Bill, but it would mean shooting if we were discovered."

"Not if the sentry's a real German," grinned Bill. "You know what I mean—a real stout, floppy German!"

"A real stout—— Here, what are you getting at!" cried Jim, and he too was grinning.

As for Larry, as one might expect, he merely cocked his hat a little farther forward, fumbled automatically for the stump of his cigar, and scrutinized the smiling Bill from the top of his tin hat to his thick boots.

"Look here, me lad, this 'ere fat, floppy German," he said. "What are you after? Gee, lad, but—but I do believe——"

"Hist! Sit down! Let the blanket drop! There are men there, fat and floppy," whispered Bill, pulling them both back well into the entrance, and seeing that the curtain was carefully lowered. Then, pushing it aside with a single finger, he bid them in turn peer out.

A shattered hedge ran not far from the opening to the dug-out, masking the entrance to some extent. A bank, too, obstructed the approach to it, and bordered a sunken road, which no doubt at one time had been a feature of the village situated just there. But the village had gone long since. High-explosive shells had churned the ground in all directions, had torn the pleasant dwellings of the villagers to shreds, had lacerated the trees and broken them on every side, had even turned water-courses, by bursting in their channels, and, having dug deep holes and pits in all directions and flattened every prominence known by the residents, had transformed the country thereabouts, and indeed for miles and miles on either hand, into a vast disordered desert.

Yet this one feature remained—a narrow, sunken cart track, passing along beside a bank which gave it shelter, perhaps, from the desolating action of the shells—a bank which was seamed and furrowed by the spades of men who had dug deep into it for shelter. It harboured amongst those many cavities the entrance to this dug-out. As for the lane itself, it harboured at this particular moment a German—a big, lumbering man, whose steel helmet seemed so huge that it covered his head as an extinguisher covers a candle. He was plodding along towards the dug-out, perhaps some two hundred yards distant from it, his eyes upon the ground, his weary feet moving heavily, his rifle over one shoulder.

"That's him," said Bill, pointing a finger through a niche made by withdrawing the curtain with his finger. "That's our sentry—a fine big, fat German!"

He could feel rather than hear Larry giggling. As for Jim, he squatted down beside the wooden sides of the entrance to the dug-out and did his utmost to stifle the roars of laughter he felt bound to give way to. For somehow the sight of that plodding German coming steadily towards them, Bill's incriminating finger, and their own peculiar position, struck a ludicrous note. It tickled his fancy immensely.

"Ho! ho! ho!" he roared, till Larry, turning, struck him sharply on the shoulder.

"Gee, man!" he said; "d'yer think we're going to stay here and be captured 'cos a big lout such as you gets a-laughin'? But Bill's right, ain't he? A fine German, just fine! And won't he do for us! Just how'll we tackle him?"

"Tackle him!" exclaimed Bill. "Easy! Get your gun, push it through the curtain. Here, wait till he gets close to us, then watch and see!"

Neither of the three had any fears as to the result of the encounter, and less so as the German drew nearer. From being just a big, fat, ambling German, he was seen from a closer view to be in addition a very shaken and frightened individual.

"Here, you just sit up sharp," said Larry, pushing his revolver through an opening which Jim made, while Bill pushed his head up through the other side of the curtain. "Hands up—quick! Now, young feller, you come over here straight! D'you get me?"

The German "got him" at once. He stood of a sudden stock still, lifted his eyes, and gazed at the entrance to the dug-out. Then he dropped his rifle, opened his mouth wide as if about to shout, and half turned. But at that instant Larry's weapon was pushed still farther forward, and, obedient to Bill's beckoning finger, the German picked up his rifle, holding it well above his head, and the other hand also, and advanced towards them.

"Now, you look here, you Hun," said Larry, pushing his way farther forward, "I'll be just behind you here—savvy?—with a bit of the curtain

between us. You'll march to and fro—get me? Just to and fro same as any ordinary sentry. But if you try tricks, cunning tricks, me boy, look out for it!"

"Aye, look out for it!" Jim chimed in; "because, if Larry misses, I ain't so bad a shot by no means."

"Here, he doesn't understand. Let's try him with a bit of French," said Bill, stepping out to the bewildered German. "Speak English?" he asked, and then, as the man answered "Nein"; "then understand this," he told him in French, "you're to act as sentry. If you are challenged by any other Germans, simply say that you've been put here by orders. Don't try to play any games with us. My friends here are Americans, and perhaps you know what that means: they can shoot. You understand that, eh?"

The man nodded; his mouth gaped for a moment, and then, flinging his rifle over his shoulder, he began to move to and fro, to and fro, like an automaton, glancing sheepishly at the entrance to the dug-out, and seeing there every now and again a little niche or opening, and from that niche the faces of either Jim or Larry or Bill, and sometimes also the muzzle of a revolver. It was marching to and fro that comrades of his saw him, and, taking it for granted that he had been stationed there to watch the dug-out, they passed on without thinking to challenge him. For the moment, in fact, Bill's ruse had saved his comrades from capture, but how long would it act in that manner? The sentry could not possibly march to and fro for ever, and presently there would be more Germans in the neighbourhood. What then?

"Aye, what then?" asked Larry thoughtfully, as he cocked and uncocked his revolver.

"Ah!" replied Jim, unable to fathom the difficulty.

"A teaser," agreed Bill. "Let's hope for the best! What about a meal anyway?"

"Fine!" was Larry's terse rejoinder.

CHAPTER XIII
Surrounded

"Let's count heads," said Bill, some hours after the German sentry was posted and when one of the watchers had reported that he still continued diligently at his post. "It's getting dark—things will be moving presently."

"And if we ain't by then, something unpleasant will be happening," remarked the big man with the hairy waistcoat as he ladled the contents of a steaming dixie out into the mess-tins of the men. "That there sentry, as I've squinted at this dozen times now, will be off the moment it gets dark and dusk's fallen. Give 'im ten minutes from that to shout hisself hoarse and call up some of 'is mates; after that——"

"After that," grinned one of the men, as though he rather enjoyed the statement and thought it a joke, "there'll be a swarming band of the blighters all round—there'll be bombs coming down most like. Say, boys, we'd better eat all the grub we've got and make the best of it. Pity to waste good things—eh?"

He laughed as he dug his teeth into a huge slice of bread-and-jam.

"But what about the heads? There's Jim and Bill and me—I counts us three first, boys, 'cos, you see, I knows me mates best," explained Larry. "Then there's Nobby here, our cook—and prime good stuff he turns out—that's four, and Simkins over there eating bread-and-jam—five; and, yes, there's five more, which makes us ten down below and one upstairs watching the Hun—eleven good boys—eh?"

"And ten hundred Huns outside," said Bill. "Yes, fair odds, Larry. Fighting won't do much for us; we've got to use a little artifice. Seems to me the first thing to do is to get out of the dug-out, for once the sentry does get off, or once we're discovered, it will become a trap. As to the sentry getting off, we could soon put a stop to that by dragging him down here. But is it worth it?"

"And what then?" demanded Nobby. "Young Bill, you are the boy to show us the ropes—eh?"

"Yep. You bet!" Larry interjected. "This here Bill's shown me and Jim and a whole lot of pals the ropes before now. This ain't the time to spout, but you can take it from me that he's a bit of a leader. Waal, Bill, what about it?"

"Aye, what about it?" they asked, gathering round the young Englishman, much to Bill's discomfort.

"Don't you get rattled," said Nobby, seeing him flush. For though the light was not very good down there the fluttering candle still showed sufficient light to make the men's faces easily visible, and Bill had flushed at Larry's words. "You sit yerself down and take another bite; there's just a tinful left at the bottom of my dixie. Then have a smoke—one o' these yeller perils. Yer don't know them! Yer don't smoke! Why, these 'ere things is the soldier's delight, and the orficers smoke 'em too; so they're good, you can guess. No, you won't eat any more, and yer won't smoke, but yer thinkin'. What is it?"

"Can't say," said Bill. "But I'm too young to lead you fellows."

"Too young!" exclaimed Nobby. "You don't 'come it' in that way, young Bill. I ain't been down 'ere these many days cookin' for our mess without learning things. My word, Larry ain't the one to talk much unless you've got 'im in a good mood—and seems to me he ain't always in a good mood—but he did talk at times, and—well—there's some of us as has heard o' that trawler. Boys, there ain't no officer 'ere; there's some of us what 'as got non-commissioned rank—but this is a fix what's likely to cost us our liberty. Who's to lead us?"

"Bill," came from many of them. "Bill," they cried.

"Sure—Bill. Didn't I tell you, boys," said Larry. "Then get in at it, youngster. What are we to do?"

"Do?—it's almost impossible to say," Bill answered them; for during the last few hours he had been hard at work considering the situation—only to meet with disappointment. How could he devise any plan when there was nothing to base his plans upon? If they stayed down in the dug-out they

risked destruction and certainly imprisonment; if they went abroad, well, plans then depended entirely upon circumstances.

"Boys," he said, "I'll do what I can. Some of you fellows may be senior to me, but no matter; we're all in the show together, and if I can help, why, you can count on me. Now, as to what we're to do: I'm going aloft at once, and immediately it's dark enough I'm going to our German and I'll send him off down the lane double quick, with orders not to come back unless he wants a bullet in him. By then you chaps will have collected all the grub you've got, each one of you will have picked up his rifle, and you will see that every round of ammunition we're possessed of is carried on with you. Then we take a line that leads us west and south, and we'll make for the Somme River, for that's the direction, I think, in which our troops have retreated."

"Good for you!" said Larry.

"It sounds a likely sort of business, it do," said the big man with the hairy waistcoat—"leastways it's better'n nothing. Being cooped up here is worse than bein' blown to bits or taken prisoner out in the open. Well," he went on, swinging his arms wide, or as wide, we will say, as the dug-out permitted, and throwing his chest forward, "the open's the place for a man—eh, boys? Living down here like a rat or like a rabbit ain't what I asks for."

A glance at this gallant fellow was quite enough to show that he was an open-air man; he was indeed a typical example of your English countryman who lives the day long in the open, thrives on fresh air, and looks robust and sturdy. As to fear, he seemed to have no idea as to what it meant, and rather looked upon these new difficulties and dangers as something of a diversion. He at any rate would make a most excellent companion on the sort of adventure on which the party were now to step out. Bill glanced at him approvingly; Larry cocked an eye at this burly Englishman and smiled.

"Say, boy," he lisped, "ef you ain't just it—just the sort o' pard as Uncle Sam likes. I'm glad I've a chance of soldiering up alongside o' you. It does a man good what's come from the States, where we've been looking on at the fighting these last two or three years, to come in contact with British soldiers who've been fighting like tigers all this while. But we'll do the same, never you fear. America means business!"

Probably the huge Nobby had never had such a long speech addressed to him before, and in front of such an audience. He positively blushed—stuttered—grinned—and then brought an enormous paw down on Larry's attenuated shoulder.

"Don't you worry, chum," he said; "I'll look after you. If any blighted German tries to get at yer, just call to me."

It was hardly the kind of statement that Larry looked for—distinctly not the sort of thing he required, for, diminutive though he was, the American positively oozed courage and determination—that cool determination which seemed to suit him and his languid person so admirably. As for wanting anyone to take care of him, he was well able to do that for himself, and was about to tell Nobby so in unmistakable manner, when, on second thoughts, he realized that it was merely good comradeship which had prompted him to give vent to the statement.

"You're a chum," was all he said; "you'll look after me. And say, Nobby, ef ever you get into a tight corner, just sing out. I'm small but I'm handy—eh?"

He grinned as he turned in Jim's direction, and then winked at Bill, whereat Nobby glanced at the two of them to find Jim nodding violently.

"He's put the case fine," said the latter. "Larry's small—you'd think you could take him by the neck and shake the life out of him—but he's a vixenish little rat, I can tell you, and he'd dig his teeth into you before you could get a real good grip. And, Nobby boy, don't you ask him to start in with a gun; he'd flick the eyelid off of a weasel within ten yards, would Larry—it's part of his vixenish spirit. Oh yes, he's weak, he is! A tarnation little rat to deal with."

It was complimentary in half a sense, the reverse if viewed from another direction. But it pleased Larry immensely, and it appealed to the understanding of the British soldier. He glanced 'cutely at Larry, took far more notice of the various points of his person, and then patted him violently on the shoulder.

"I see! You're sort o' small and daring," he said, "and—and—pug—er—what's the word?"

"Pugnacious," Bill interjected.

"Aye, pugnacious—always wantin' a row, looking round for things to fight, like so many little people. And he can shoot—he can flick the eyelid off a weasel! Well, that'ud want doing at ten yards. But, to speak as you chaps do, I guess he can shoot. That's good. He'll want to know how in the next few hours, if we're to get through the Germans. Now, boys, up we go!"

They waited, however, in the dug-out whilst Bill clattered up the stairs and so to the curtain. Peering out, he discovered it was already dusk, though he could still see the German sentry. The man was trapesing up and down in less soldierly manner—he was slouching in fact—looking about him a great deal more than he had done before, and, if only Bill could have read his mind, was wondering how long it would be before the dusk was sufficiently deep to allow him to bolt away suddenly from his captors.

"Only, then there's the alternative," this hulking German was saying to himself. "I must return to our forces—I must continue fighting. Ah! that is terrible! I am tired of it—always it is fight on! fight on!—for victory! We Germans outnumber them by hundreds of thousands, and then, where is the victory? Not at Verdun—where I fought! Not at Ypres before it! Not since then anyway. And now in this great 'push' shall we attain it?"

It was a question which many another German was asking himself at that moment—many indeed of the High Command. For Germany was staking everything—her very existence—upon this enormous and sudden offensive, which she had launched against the British Third and Fifth Armies. We have already recapitulated the facts of the case, and will only remind the reader that on March 21st, when this assault was opened, Germany's eastern front facing Russia had been almost completely depleted of German troops. The railways across Germany from Russia into France were almost worn out with the constant transit of battalions; and here they were—they and those guns—those guns manufactured by Britain for Russia and treacherously handed over to the Germans. Here they all were—thrown pell mell at the British—and already the line had bulged back, thanks to this enormous mass of fighting material and to a favouring mist; and the line was to go still farther back. Indeed the Fifth Army was to experience on this day, and for almost ten days following, as severe fighting as ever troops took part in

on the Western Front. Nothing but swift retreat, fighting every inch of the way, could save the British line; nothing but constant pressure, giving here and there as German masses became overwhelming—constant pressure, with retreat at the psychological moment, and taking advantage of every coign and vantage-point—that and only that, with British valour behind it, could save the line and hold up this gigantic massed attack on the part of the enemy.

We may advance the story a little with advantage. The Fifth British Army, which by all the canons of warfare should have been annihilated, considering its inferior strength and the enormous advantage the mist gave the enemy—that army retreated rapidly at first, but maintained cohesion between its various units. It fought night and day, it fought for every foot of the road from Peronne and back to the valley of the Somme. It held up the German advance here and there and everywhere, and melted away from it as huge German reinforcements were brought up. It smote the enemy battalions, it laid thousands of them in the dirt, and finally, after days and nights of an ordeal which would have tried the best of troops, it passed the line at Albert, running north and south, where the British and French trench line had rested from 1914 onwards to the summer of 1916, until, indeed, the Somme battles were fought. There it settled down firmly like a rock, holding up further advance on the part of the enemy.

During these strenuous days the Third British Army, on the left of the Fifth, also fell back as respects its right flank, inflicting very severe casualties on the enemy, while French reserves and American troops were poured in the direction of Albert and Montdidier, where soon the Germans were beating against the Franco-American-British line ineffectually, fighting desperately to continue an advance and to force the British into a rout.

That retreat will, when its details are better known, be viewed as of as great historical importance as that from Mons to the south-east of Paris in 1914. Indeed, in a measure and in its own particular way, it will demand closer attention and perhaps greater admiration on the part of a future generation. For, whereas the retreat from Mons was performed by the British Expeditionary Force when small in numbers as compared with the enemy, the fighting was less strenuous, manœuvre warfare had only just commenced and that at the very commencement of hostilities. The retreat

from Peronne to the Somme and across it was, on the contrary, manœuvre warfare following a long period of close trench warfare. In it the utmost use was made of mechanical means of killing people. No cavalry screens could hold the enemy off as our fine cavalry did on the road to the south-east of Paris. It was a case of machine-guns and trench mortars in front firing into the British, and British machine-guns and rifles attempting to hold up the advance of a horde of men armed to the teeth, behind whom were masses of guns constantly being hurried forward.

This retreat, however, is analogous to that from Mons in one respect, in that our very gallant French ally fought shoulder to shoulder with us. It marks as well a stage absolutely apart, a new era in this gigantic war in that at this moment American troops appeared, to fight shoulder to shoulder with us. Not yet had American troops appeared in force. There were some hundreds of thousands of them already in France, but the bulk—the millions that America can and will place in the field if need be—were still in America, five thousand miles distant, and time and ships were needed to convey such armies and the material essential for them. Those American troops, let us add—forerunners of the vast army above referred to—acquitted themselves like men. Though only a few of the number then in France were flung into this battle they did wonderful work, so that Larry and Jim and Bill had every reason to be proud of them.

Mention of the last brings us back to our friends. Bill, emerging from the dug-out entrance, gripped the German sentry.

"See that?" he said, pointing down the lane, now hardly distinguishable. "Move on. Don't turn to right or to left—and look out—we shall be following you. If you try to communicate with your pals—well, there'll be trouble."

He saw the lumbering German go plodding off down the lane, his rifle still over his shoulder, and waited until he disappeared into the gloom. Then he shouted down the stairway:

"Come up, boys, all clear!"

One by one the men filed up from below, each carrying his rifle and ammunition as well as a haversack filled with provisions, while the

majority also had water-bottles, and all wore steel helmets. Presently they stood outside the entrance in the gathering dusk, a forlorn little band, fully conscious of the fact that they stood as it were alone in this veritable "No-Man's-Land", surrounded by a host of Germans. Indeed, as they stood there waiting for the order to move, they could hear voices here and there—the guttural tones of the Kaiser's soldiers—while from their right, in a south-westerly direction, there came the continuous rattle of machine-guns, the rolling sounds of volleys and of independent rifle-firing, and, smothering all these sounds at times, the racket of a heavy cannonade. Far away sounds seemed to be echoing—the sounds of British guns and British rifles and other weapons.

"And then?" asked Nobby, his tin hat a little on one side, his hairy person standing out conspicuous from amongst the others in spite of the semi-darkness. "Over there," and he jerked a thumb towards the fighting-line, "there's ructions, and round about there's Huns, and there'll be Fritzes here and there and everywhere between us and the battle-line. Young Bill, you've got somethin' to face! What's the word?"

"Aye, what's the word?" others asked.

"March! Not a sound! Let no one answer if they challenge. But wait, we'll form up into column of twos, and I'll post a man on either flank of the column whose job it will be to tackle any inquisitive German. No shots to be fired, boys! Butt-ends!"

"Ah! butt-ends! I'll butt-end Fritz if he comes near me!" growled Nobby, his grin gone for a moment, looking, what indeed he was, a formidable fellow, as he swung his rifle-butt forward from the sling which was over his shoulder. "If Fritz comes between me and liberty—well, it'll be Fritz's fault. I've done 'em in before now, young Bill, and I'll do in a few more before this journey's finished."

"March!" Bill put himself at the head of the little column and trudged forward, first a few steps down the lane and then out through a gap which led from it towards the south-west. Right away, far on their right, he could distinguish a huge dull mass, which common sense and his knowledge of the geography of those parts told him must be the Butte of Warlencourt. Farther along, a little to the right of it, would lie the Albert-Bapaume road,

the road which led to safety, and along that again, in the direction of Albert, on either side, a country decimated and torn to shreds by the fighting in 1916. There the Somme battles were bitterly contested, and for miles on either hand, where once had been a fair land dotted with pleasant villages, was now, as he knew from frequent observation, a blasted, battered rolling plain of mud and grass, and grass and mud and shell-holes interspersed with fragments of smashed villages. Here and there, perhaps as much as four feet of a wall remaining, elsewhere the base of some ancient church, a factory in another part crumbling to dust, its machinery rusting—rotten with exposure.

There would be derelict British tanks, too, turned on their sides, burst by interior explosion, and far and wide, here and there in groups—as in the case of the graves of those gallant Australians who captured Pozières—stood pathetic little crosses, beneath which rested all that remained of men who had gallantly fought for the empire. You who live secure in old England, and find it almost impossible to imagine such conditions, take the word of those who have seen. Conjure up in your mind's eye this blasted country, and recollect that there, on the fields they conquered, lie men who died for you, that you and England might survive the tyranny of Prussia.

But enough of such things. Bill knew every step of the way, for he had driven it and walked it on many an occasion.

"March!" he exclaimed; "we'll make straight for the Butte and then for the road. Look out for Germans! A few German overcoats would give us fine cover, and this mist also should help us far on our way. Step out—the faster we go the better!"

They went off through the gathering gloom, through the wet mist which was already cloaking the earth, and presently swung past the western end of the Butte of Warlencourt, which marked the limit of advance of the British army in 1916. Then their feet gained the Albert-Bapaume road, and presently they were speeding along it and getting every half-hour nearer to the sounds of battle. But though they marched nearer and nearer to their friends, what chance had they? Would they ever break through that line of Germans which undoubtedly extended far and wide and cut them adrift from the Allied armies?

CHAPTER XIV
Where Men fought for Empire

"Halt! I hear men coming! There are troops on the road—listen!"

Bill, who was leading the party of men cut off from the British army—a party, be it remembered, comprising not only sturdy British soldiers, but just as sturdy members of the new American army—suddenly thrust out an arm and brought them to a standstill. There on the paved highway which runs from Albert to Bapaume, and which the British, with that thoroughness for which they have now no doubt won world-wide fame, had macadamized and rolled until it was as smooth as a billiard table, though but a few months before it had been churned and smashed to pieces by gun-fire—there, unhappily, the same churning and smashing process was being repeated between the spot where Bill and his friends stood and Albert itself, perhaps five miles distant. For in that direction the thunder of guns was loudest, and even the mist and the darkness could not hide the flash of hidden batteries and the bursting of shells from British artillery, nor could the sounds of distant battle altogether drown other sounds—the deep muffled tread of a mass of men.

"Coming back towards us from the Albert direction," said Bill. "Probably men who have been relieved, or perhaps it's a ration party. Anyway, off we go! Take the road here to the right. Look sharp!"

He stepped off the macadam, to find himself to his arm-pits in a huge shell-hole—a relic of 1916—in which also reclined what remained of a shattered tank—one of the land fighting-ships which Britain had brought to bear against the Germans. Clambering out of it, with two other men of the party who had been similarly unfortunate, he struck away from the road, the others following closely. Then, of a sudden, Larry called to him.

"Say, Bill, here's just the sort of stunt for us! Seems like an old building."

"Aye, a *sucrerie*. I remember it," came from Nobby. "Here you are, here's one of the tanks in which they boiled their roots. It's Pozières—for a

hundred! Pozières! don't I know it? Here's where the Australians did in the Germans what was holding 'em up, and pushed on towards Courcelette."

Bill recollected the place at once. Not once but a hundred times probably had he been up or down this Albert-Bapaume road, and, like everyone who had traversed it, he remembered well that little graveyard on the left with the crosses to the gallant Australians, and on the right, here and there, lost almost amongst the tumbled earth and smashed country-side, solitary little crosses, and farther along on the left again, as he went to Bapaume or Peronne, that shattered factory with the old sugar-tanks, smashed and crumbled and perforated by shrapnel and machine-gun bullets, lying three hundred yards from the road, sole relic of the once flourishing and pretty village of Pozières, now relic only of a spot which was the scene of some of the bitterest fighting in 1916.

"In you go," said Bill. "These ruins will hide us, and we can sit down and have a feed. Nobby, you know the place you say—tell us all about it, so that we may know what we're in for. Any good hiding-places?"

"Know the place?" grinned Nobby, as they entered the shattered walls of the factory and sat themselves down on the floor, which was still littered with much of the broken material left by the British. "Well now, when I was here—seems months and months ago—there was a medical post stationed 'ere, covered up in sand-bags. And, my word, didn't they want 'em! Shrapnel was comin' over all the time, and you've only got to see those tanks outside to realize how machine-gun bullets were buzzing. Yet it was a comfortable enough crib then, though rough, and gave fair shelter."

"Fair shelter?" said Bill, suddenly pricking up his ears and thinking. "Supposing now we were forced to protect ourselves, it would——"

The gallant Nobby realized his meaning promptly. "It would," he said with emphasis. "These 'ere old walls, what you can see of 'em in the mist and the darkness, are thick—that is, what's left of 'em is—and there used to be a cellar underneath the floor. If Fritz becomes inquisitive and tries to round us up, why, believe me, this 'ere place might do us a treat. Better'n being in the dug-out anyway. 'Sides, as I remember it, it just tops a rise, and the ground slopes gently away from it all round. That'ud be nasty for the Boche, eh?"

"It'ud provide us with a hiding-place perhaps," said Bill thoughtfully, as they all sat down and munched a ration. "Looks to me, Larry, as though we'd better have another council of war, we fellows, right forward there. We might with a bit of luck get right through the lines during the night. On the other hand, we mightn't. We'd stand a better chance if we could hide up in a place like this, which, as Nobby says, ain't a dug-out, but gives us shelter. We could then get an observation post and look round the neighbourhood. Of course the place might be searched; but then we always stand a chance of being discovered, even if we move on, eh? What's your idea? What do you say about it?"

"Yep," said Larry, pursing his lips. "Gee! this here's a conundrum! I'd like to treat it as our folks say in 'judgematical' manner. Supposin' we move on—well, soon we've got to get off the road, for we've come somewhere near the line where troops are moving. You may say that the Germans have pushed right ahead, past the Butte of Warlencourt and beyond Pozières. They've made a tidy advance in the few hours that have passed since their offensive opened, and now they're held up, or nearly held up, let's hope, somewheres just in front of us. But where is that somewheres? It may be just a mile ahead; it mayn't, on the other hand. Supposin' we moves on, then we may barge into a whole crowd and get bayoneted for our trouble; we may get shot down by our own guns; or we may even find ourselves mixed up in a German offensive and get done in by German machine-gun bullets, perhaps American machine-gun bullets—for some of our boys will get rushed up to help the Allied line. No, siree, I vote that we sits down here for the night, and, come morning, hides away. Then we'll look up some place from which we can observe, and will try to get an idea of what's happening."

"And Jim?" asked Bill, for Jim was one of those quiet Americans who never spoke unless he had something worth saying, but whose opinion was valuable.

"I'm in with Larry," he said. "There's uncertainty either way, whether we go forward or remain here. We may get hunted out to-morrow, or caged in this place like rats in a trap. If so, we can put up a fight at least, same as I guess many other pockets of soldiers overrun by the Germans will be doing. Better that than push on and shove our noses into a noose."

One after another the men gave vent to their own particular personal opinions, and so it became apparent that the general consensus of thought was that the party should halt where it was and rest till dawn came. After that—well, their fortunes lay in the lap of the gods. It was hardly likely that they would escape from such a predicament without trouble or danger, but, if it came, they would be better able to face it after having rested.

Trust the British soldier and his American chum to make the most of any sort of surroundings and to gain comfort in spite of bleak conditions. Half an hour later the whole party—with the exception of one man who watched at the exit of the factory—lay fast asleep, snoring, in their greatcoats under the blankets, which each of them had carried. The sentry stood on a piled-up heap of shattered masonry which had once supported the upper floor of the factory, looking through one of the exits. We have said one of the exits, though that hardly gives a good idea of the condition of the place, seeing that British guns and German guns had each in turn hammered this property, with the result that walls had been flattened and holed. The upper story had gone entirely, windows were no more, and but a battered wreck remained, with hardly a semblance of a factory about it, gaping to the skies with wide rents in all directions. Its interior was a mass of fallen stones, save where lay relics of previous British occupation.

Morning found the party, refreshed by their sleep, fit once more and ready for anything. The mist, too, was not sufficiently thick to prevent their inspecting their immediate surroundings, and Bill, as leader of the party, at once proceeded to make himself familiar with them.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Some hundreds of sand-bags here. Some of 'em rotten and going to pieces, but others quite sound. They formed, of course, the protection to the aid post. And here's the 'elephant' shelters still standing. Better still! they'll keep the rain out. Now for a squint all round, and then for the cellar. Seems to me we might hold out here for some time."

Months before, parties of natives and others employed by the British had swept over the Somme battle-field, throughout its vast extent, and had salvaged a great amount of material for future use: guns here and there, munitions elsewhere, telephone wires, every sort of warlike material had been gathered in to one collecting centre, even timbers had been extracted

from the deep dug-outs constructed by the Germans. But sand-bags and this heavy iron sheeting forming the "elephant" shelter were not worth removing, and were therefore left to rot like the remainder of their surroundings. To Bill and his friends they promised a certain amount of security.

"You see," said Bill, "we could set to work now, select the bags that are in good order, and form a strong post here, out of which no sort of machine-gun fire could drive us—they'd have to bring guns along, or bombs, to do us in—eh, Larry? What about it, Nobby? Suppose the Germans did track us to this spot, are you going to surrender without putting up a fight?"

Nobby looked distinctly annoyed. He glared at Bill, and looked more enormous and more formidable in his hairy coat in that morning mist than he had done previously. He smote himself violently on the chest and tilted his tin hat forward.

"Me give in to Fritz without a fight?" he asked. "'Ere, young chap, what d'yer take me for?—a blinkin' blighter?"

Bill didn't. He mollified the great Nobby by placing one hand on his stalwart shoulder, and then turned to Larry. It was characteristic of the latter that he merely smiled.

"What should I do? What'ud you do yerself, Bill? Give in, of course! Walk out and ask Fritz to be friendly! That's you all over, that is. Just what you'd do, Bill: hob-nob with him—ask him to take a cup of tea—sit down and be pally."

"Huh!" It was then that Jim laughed—Jim, the usually silent American. Larry's sarcasm tickled him wonderfully, and then, of course, he knew Bill so thoroughly. Was it typical of Bill, the young fellow who led them, cool, quiet, and calm on most occasions, yet already an approved fire-eater—was it typical of him to suggest surrender without putting up a strenuous opposition? Jim cackled loudly.

"There'll be trouble here soon, Larry," he went on, "ef you carry on like that. This here Bill was only asking a polite question, and it's up to you to answer politely—you and Nobby, who's about the biggest and most pugnacious man I've come across this side of the water. As ef we didn't

know that both of you are crazy for a fight, and believe me, yep, you'll be having it soon, to your heart's content. Here we are, boxed in, we might say, only in nicer surroundings than we was back there in the dug-out, and d'you mean to say that we're going to give up these comfortable quarters because Fritz asks us to do so?"

Jim stood up and stretched his hands out on either side, pointing to their immediate surroundings—those shattered masses of bricks and mortar, tumbled beams, and wrecked and twisted ironwork—for all the world as if it were a palace. And, indeed, to these men, accustomed to the decimated country of France, in which war was now raging, these shattered factory walls did present the aspect, if not of a palace, then of a place which offered some sort of protection. Those sand-bags, for instance, the ironwork of the "elephant" shelter, the heaps of bricks also, all offered something which would allow them to put up a formidable resistance. It was not a matter that needed explaining to any one of the party, it was merely a question of coming to a decision as to their plans. Not a single one of the party was likely to be behindhand in his determination; yet it was good to hear Larry talking so sarcastically to Bill, Jim laughing at them, and to see the huge Nobby getting red with indignation at the very suggestion of surrender. It was encouraging to see the spirit of cheerful confidence, as well as defiance, that animated all.

"In course we all comes in," blurted out one of the party, himself no inconspicuous person, inasmuch as he stood nearly six feet in his socks, and was as fine and clean-limbed a young Englishman as one could wish to find. "I ain't got no particular 'down' on Fritz, I ain't, though I bears in mind the fact that he's murdered women and children and old men up and down the country; all I asks for is a clean fight, if he can give it, which I doubts. If not, then let's have a fight that'll do for him, and if I don't give Mr. Fritz 'is stomick full, why, you can send me home to Blighty. Fight, Bill? In course we will! Nobby knows you will, only he likes a row, he does. What about fixing the plans up—eh? so as to make ready."

The upshot of it all was that they put their heads together, and very soon every one of the party, save one particular man, was hard at work perfecting their defences, selecting the best of the sand-bags and piling them into the openings in the brickwork, so that the shell of the factory, no very

considerable place, was soon converted into a species of filter, in the centre of which a ragged hole gave access to a rotting and severely damaged staircase, and that in turn to a cellar which would give protection from gun-fire.

In the meanwhile a single man had clambered to a post of vantage on the walls, where his figure was concealed by a mass of ivy, which already was invading the interior of the factory. From that point he could survey the country-side, and, as the mist lifted, was able to report to his friends what was going forward.

"There's guns and men and carts of all sorts filing along the road—thousands of 'em—all making towards Albert; and—'arf a mo! bless me, if there ain't aeroplanes comin' along in this direction! What's they got, naughts or crosses? Ah, it's naughts! They're British. Oh, and ain't they givin' 'em 'arf a time! Believe me, they're a-clearin' this 'ere road from Albert to Bapaume, divin' down and droppin' things! And Fritz ain't 'arf a-boltin'. Look at them blighters scuttlin' in among the trees like a flock o' scared chickens!"

The announcement brought every man of the party to some aperture from which he looked craftily towards the road, but a little way distant; and there, as he watched, as the sentry had told him, he could see columns of Germans pressing on after the British line, which had retreated, some of the battalions marching across the ploughed-up and shell-destroyed land on either hand. Overhead, flights of aeroplanes could be seen, and some of these were skimming low over the road, emptying their machine-guns into the massed infantry, which in turn either broke up in confusion, and dived from the road, or fired with their rifles upon the aeroplanes, though with little or no effect.

From the far distance came the muffled roar of guns, sometimes silenced, as it were, by the nearer staccato rattle of machine-guns, and then from perhaps five hundred yards away was heard the sharp report of anti-aircraft weapons.

"And it do yer good," said Nobby, hidden well behind the masonry, staring up into the sky, "it do yer good to see them boys up there fightin' their aeroplanes same as ships is fought at sea. Gee! as our one and only Larry

says, if they ain't cleared the road already! There's not a bloomin' German left on it, which says somethin' for aeroplanes and more for British machine-guns, lettin' alone the young chaps as works 'em. If only some of 'em could see us down 'ere and drop to the ground to take us off! I wouldn't be scared, give you my word, though I'd rather go through any sort of battle in the front line than go up in an aeroplane. They don't look safe, and they ain't, that's my belief, though to see them boys of ours a-goin' off in 'em you'd think it was just a joy ride. S'welp me! 'Ere, what's happenin'?"

Bill, standing close beside him, gripped his arm.

"Get down!" he said; "they're coming this way. Our machine-guns have driven them from the road, and they are looking for shelter. This is an awkward business."

"Awkward! It's—it's—rotten!" said Nobby.

"Yep," they heard the inevitable lisp from Larry. "Gee! it is real awkward that! Them German chaps don't like your British machine-guns firing down on 'em, and I don't wonder; but that didn't ought to make 'em want to come poachin' here on our shelter. We ain't got no use for 'em! See here, Bill, it's likely to show us up."

Necks were craned round odd corners, eyes peered out across the broken ground towards the road, and fixed themselves upon numbers of crawling figures—the figures of German infantry who a little while before had been marching full of confidence along the Albert road. But those swirling aeroplanes which had drawn the admiring glances of Bill and his friends had swooped down upon them, and, as we have described, they had cleared the road in little time, but for the men who lay killed or wounded upon it, and now had shot off towards Bapaume, bombing and machine-gunning other troops behind. But they might return at any instant, and, with that in mind, the Germans, swept from the road, were seeking the closest cover. Some of them had been attracted by the ruins where Bill and his party hid, and were coming rapidly towards them.

"And there's quite a whole heap of 'em," said Nobby.

"Ah!" he heard Bill exclaim. "If it was a matter of a dozen, or even two, we might take 'em one by one as they crawled in, and——"

"And do 'em in," whispered Nobby. "Here, let me get down to that place there for which they are making. I'll do 'em in, 'struth I will!"

"No!" Bill told him abruptly. "Hun or no Hun, we'd play the game and take 'em prisoners; but there's too many of 'em."

"And a jolly good job too," Nobby growled. "If it's to be a case of taking prisoners and playing the game, or a case of fightin', let's fight. There's not one of us as ain't ready for it."

"Not one." A glance round at the assembled men showed them all eager, some gripping their rifles with bayonets fixed, others already opening pouches which carried their bombs, while Larry had produced from amongst the ruins an iron bar some two feet in length, which he proposed to use as a club. Bill smiled upon them.

"Good boys!" he said. "One of you chaps pitch a bomb over, just to let 'em know that they ain't welcome; then the fight'll start fair. Now, all the rest get down under cover."

It was Nobby who stepped into the centre of the ruin so as to give his arm free play, and, pulling the safety-pin from his grenade, measured the distance with his eye and lobbed it over, all eyes following its path till presently it struck the ground perhaps twenty yards in front of the leading German. Then there was a violent explosion; the enemy advancing upon the ruin halted, looked at one another, discussed the situation, and even began to retreat. But, a minute later, one, who proved to be an officer, crawling right behind the others, came to the head of the column, and, realizing that none but an enemy could have tossed that bomb, and that here, quite by accident, he and his men had unearthed a party of the British, sent scouts out to surround the place, and presently, calling other men to his assistance, opened rifle-fire upon them. The action had begun. From the numbers engaged upon it on the enemy's side it looked as though Bill and his friends had little chance of pursuing their journey.

CHAPTER XV
Attacked from All Sides

"It's going to be an attack from all sides," said Bill, as he crouched behind a mass of masonry which stood rather higher than the rest, and which, while giving a certain amount of shelter, also allowed him to look out over the wreckage of the factory, to peer into neighbouring shell-holes, past shattered and rent tree trunks towards the Albert-Bapaume road in one direction, to Courcellette in the other, and elsewhere across the desert of churned-up earth which represented the heart of this once beautiful Somme country. "And I can see heads bobbing up here and there and everywhere, and, yes, there go the bullets!"

One of them splashed debris and rotting mortar in his eyes as it struck the fractured masonry just above his head, while another thudded into a sand-bag not a yard from him—a sand-bag which had lain there rotting since 1916, and which now, receiving the sudden blow, burst asunder, the earth which it had contained spouting out in a cascade. It was answered almost instantly by a shot fired from a crevice somewhere down below him. He searched for the figure of the man who had discharged his weapon, and after a while distinguished the well-known form of Nobby, his broad shoulders squeezed in an angle of broken masonry, his head thrust forward, his tin hat covering him like a halo, legs bent beneath him, arms pressed to his sides, weapon at the ready. Glancing across the open space towards Courcellette, Bill saw one of those dodging German figures suddenly rear itself erect, bend forward as if about to fall, then with an effort straighten up, only of a sudden to give vent to a shrill shout—a shriek almost—and collapse into the shell-hole from which he had originally clambered.

"One Hun the less," grinned Nobby, turning round, "and he won't be the only Fritz as'll 'go west' in this 'ere skirmish. Larry boy, d'yer want our commanding officer to be shot down out of hand, just because he must put himself up where there's no cover. I'm only a humble private, you're a full-blown sergeant, why don't yer see to the chum that's commanding us?"

It wasn't the first occasion, perhaps, when the good-natured Larry had shown unusual energy and decision. Not that he was incapable of either or both those virtues, but it was typical of Larry that as a general rule he lounged and drawled and lisped, and really made pretence that he was a person of no great consequence and of no great ability in any way. Yet friends knew that he was stanch, that danger did not daunt him, that fear was almost foreign to the nature of this diminutive, delicate-looking, nonchalant, and unconcerned American. He turned swiftly in the narrow angle where he lay near Nobby, and cast a threatening glance at Bill.

"Hi! Here, you, young Bill, you come right out of that!" he shouted. His face reddened with emotion as he gave the order. "You ain't got no call to stand up there like a darned fool, askin' the Hun to shoot you! Look at that? What did I tell you? Chips of mortar all round you! They've got a machine-gun going! Come down! d'yer hear?"

Jim, on the far side of the ruin, watching the shell-seamed earth between the factory and the main road, turned round too, lay flat on his back for a moment under the shelter of the wall, and shook a fist at Bill. Till then he had not noticed the perilous position in which the young fellow had placed himself, but now he saw it clearly, and, as showing what he thought of Bill, he too became heated, and that, let us add, was something foreign to Jim's calm, contented nature.

"Yep," he roared. "You come right down! What d'yer want for to get right up there, a-starin' round, when there's heaps of ruins down here to cover anyone? Ef yer don't move quick I'll be up after yer!"

Bill surveyed the two with something approaching curt disdain. He peered over the top of the masonry which protected his head, and turned slowly until he had made a complete circle; then of a sudden he pointed.

"Boys," he called out, "the officer that's commanding them is yonder on the way to the road, and he's got a machine-gun mounted. They are loading fast, so as to keep our attention while the rest of the men are collecting right opposite and are making ready just now to rush us. You'll——"

The rattle of the machine-gun in question drowned his next words, and as the splutter died down, and the chips of mortar and bricks and stone

dropped and flew about Bill's figure, it was Jim's voice and that of Larry that again were heard.

"You ain't heard us, Bill," Jim shouted. "Come down, won't yer! Yer askin' to get killed."

"I'll Fritz yer, yep!" Larry called, rising from the spot in which he lay, and jamming his tin hat closely down. "If yer don't come yerself I'll be up there to make yer."

But Bill scarcely noticed them; he turned to look first at Jim and then at Larry, and then cast a glance over his shoulder towards the spot where the attacking party of Germans were forming.

"You'll stay in your places," he ordered sharply. "Someone's got to be here to watch those fellows, and that someone's going to be the one you've put in command. If you're not contented with him, get someone else, for while I'm in command of the party here I stay. Jim, stop cackling! Go over there and lie down by Larry. Here, boy!" he called to another of the men, "your rifle'll be useful over here to stop the rush, and, Nobby, you're the boy for the bombs—get 'em ready and heave 'em over as the Huns get within distance!"

The incipient mutiny collapsed as rapidly as it had commenced. Not indeed that Larry or Jim or any of the others were inclined to quarrel over-much with the young leader they had themselves appointed. The urgency of the situation in the first place made argument undesirable if not impossible, and then Bill's abrupt commands, his obvious control of a difficult situation, the fact that an attack was just about to be launched, caused them to think of other matters; the rattle of the machine-gun, too, assisted, and to that was presently added heavy firing from many points, which caused all to keep under cover, that is, all but Bill, who stood stoically peering out over the top of the ruin, watching that party of Germans as they crept from shell-hole to shell-hole, firing an occasional shot, and getting closer every minute.

But if Bill remained aloft in his post of vantage and of danger, and if he had summarily quelled the anticipated mutiny, he could not arrest entirely the growls of Nobby, the surreptitious scowls of Larry, and the almost open threats thrown at him by Jim. Then Nobby put an end to the matter.

"He's right," he said. "That there young Bill is a-doin' just like what one of our young orficers would do, same as your orficers would take on, Larry, and here are you a-cussin' of him for it. You ought to be ashamed of yerself, you ought!"

That, with bullets flicking just above the wall and half an inch over the top of Nobby's tin hat! Not that it upset this gallant British soldier, not either that it could upset Larry—the quiet and somewhat retiring Larry. To speak the truth, in all his experience of Bill, Larry had never been so abruptly silenced, and, conscious as he was that his young friend was quite in the right, he yet burned with indignation at the summary way in which his own efforts had been worsted, and, finding Nobby close at hand and now trying to turn the tables on him, he swung round, leant up on one elbow, and poured a torrent of invective upon him.

"Say, here, this is real fine! Here's you and me and Jim gets turned down by that there young cuss of a Bill, and when he's put in the last word and fired the last shot, as you might say, there's you come roundin' on a pal—you, Nobby, what never could keep yer mouth shut. See here, sir; you're British, I'm American—only just as British as you are, if you know what I mean—I ——"

A bullet put a very sudden end to Larry's explosion; it hit the tip of his tin hat and sent it off amongst the ruins booming and clanking, while the shock of the blow partly stunned the American. He blinked at Nobby, who just a second before had raised a huge grimy fist and placed it within an inch of his nose. Larry blinked again. Nobby grinned. Jim roared outright, and thus, with the help of an enemy bullet, the little fracas was brought to a friendly ending. A second later Bill's voice was heard.

"Boys!" he called out; "there's a bunch of Huns within sixty yards of us, and they've all converged into one shell-hole. I don't suppose there's a man here who could pitch a bomb that far—only if there was——"

"Look 'ere, young chap," came from Nobby, "sixty yards! and yer don't think a man can do it! You watch. Larry, stand by to corpse the first Fritz that puts his head up and tries to shoot at me. Jim, you do the same. Same over there. You watch the boys with that machine-gun. I don't take much notice of a single rifle, but being filled up with lead ain't healthy, as Larry

likes to say; it ain't good for a fellow. So just you watch, and yer mates with you. Now then for brother Fritz in the shell-hole!"

He stood up, deliberately measured the distance from the ruin to the shell-hole at which Bill then pointed, pulled the pin from a bomb, and, swinging his powerful shoulders back, sent it hurtling towards the object. It struck a shell-hole three yards nearer, and for a moment obscured the one at which he had aimed, flinging up a cloud of mud and grass and loose material. By then Nobby had poised himself for a second attempt, and, hardly pausing to measure the distance, launched his missile, and then stood watching its curve as it approached the object.

It was Larry then who shouted, and Bill too joined in.

"Bang! Right in the centre," the latter called. "If they don't pick it up they'll be done for. They can't! Look at 'em! They're trying to bolt."

"They ain't got time—not any," Larry told him as they peered over the top of the breastwork. "There she goes!"

There was a dull detonation, a bright flash of flame, and then shouts. A second before, the shell-hole, into which Bill could look to some extent but the interior of which was hidden from the eyes of his comrades, had appeared empty but for a drain of water at the bottom; but, as the bomb fell, heads had bobbed up, and, just before the explosion occurred, fifteen or more men had struggled desperately to dash away from it. That explosion caught them in the midst of the act, and every one was killed or wounded. It was indeed a brilliant ending to this first attempt to defend themselves against the enemy, and caused the garrison of the shattered factory to set up a shout.

"But they ain't done—not by a whole heap," said Larry, producing his cigar. "It stands to reason, seeing we are here right in the midst of the enemy, that they'll have reinforcements. The noise of the bomb'll bring 'em along if the officer's whistle don't do it. Hear that? You can hear him a-whistlin' now for help. Boys, there's goin' to be a stand-up tussle."

Whereat Larry gripped his cigar and wetted his lips, while his eyes flashed. It was plain indeed that this diminutive American felt no fear, but rather that he was full of enthusiasm and ready for anything that might happen. That

Jim, too, was thirsting for adventure there was little doubt, while the rest of the party could be relied upon to support their young commander and his two American friends. Nobby himself was likely to be quite a formidable opponent.

"You see, Bill," he called out after a while, "having had one sort of lesson, and now that they know we've got bombs with us, they'll keep at a distance and'll turn machine-guns on us. Seems to me we've got to think out some clever way of fightin' 'em. What d'you think, boy? Supposin' they gets shootin' bombs in here, same as we've been throwin' 'em out—as they will, 'cos Fritz is a nasty chap at thinkin' things out—and supposin' we're a-lyin' as we are now—not healthy—eh, boy?"

"You bet!" Larry chimed in; "we should get 'done in', like Fritz over there in the shell-hole."

"Then we'll separate," Bill told him. "What d'you say to this, boys? That German officer and his men have seen us here in this ruined factory, and every shot they've fired has been put in in this particular direction. If shell-holes are good enough for Fritz, ain't they good enough for us too? Why not separate, though still forming a sort of circle? I'll stay up here and can call out to any one of you; then if bombs are thrown in, as Nobby says——"

"As you can see for yourself," said Nobby dryly, as a rifle sounded in the distance and a grenade flew over the wrecked factory and burst beyond it, "as you can see for yourself now, Bill."

"As I know," went on Bill, "then there's only one that's likely to be damaged."

"And that's you," said Larry.

"And who else?" Bill asked him curtly. "We've had all that before. You clear off, Larry, and you too, Jim. Boys, scatter in the same direction as you're lying in now. Slip off to the nearest shell-hole, get the best cover, and hold your fire till you know you've cause to use your rifles—we've got to keep the enemy out till night-fall."

And then what was to happen to this gallant and somewhat forlorn little party? Could they, having regard to all the circumstances in which they

stood, really look forward to securing their liberty and to gaining the Allied line? Could they, when they remembered that between them and that line there stretched a host of Germans, and reflected also that at the moment they were surrounded—could they reasonably expect to make further progress? It was hardly possible, certainly not probable, though, fortunately for all the members of the little band commanded by Bill, such thoughts hardly crossed their minds, and there was no time for reflection. Even as they wriggled off from the ruined walls of the factory, sidling in behind layers of brick, dodging between battered and perforated boilers and so gaining shell-holes, enemy bullets came buzzing thicker than ever over the scene, while every minute or so a rifle grenade reached the ruins, and, bursting, filled the air with bits of iron, with fragments of stone and mortar, and threw up such a cloud of dust, in spite of recent wet weather, that life became more difficult.

"Still, we've got pretty good cover," Bill thought, as, perched in a niche he had selected, he hung to his post and watched carefully all round, every now and again raising his rifle and firing at a German figure. "If only it would get dark. But it won't, not for hours yet, and there's no mist—nothing to cover us. Hi, Larry!" he shouted; "they're bunching up in front of you and Nobby. Break 'em up, if you can!"

Nobby, with a cigarette hanging to the very corner of his mouth, grinned in Bill's direction and then at Larry. It was an extremely cool and methodical Nobby who then proceeded to pip, as he termed it, brother Fritz, his shots, together with Larry's equally well-aimed fire, soon dispersing the band of Germans approaching from the point directly in front of them. But there were other points from which the enemy were advancing also. Unpleasant little rushes were indulged in here and there, all of which served to bring the enemy still nearer, till, as the minutes grew to an hour, and that hour into two, the defenders were more closely surrounded, engirdled by an increasing number of Germans, whose offensive became increasingly insistent. Bombs, too, became more frequent, bursting amongst the ruins, and in course of time driving Bill and the defenders completely out of them.

"It's no go!" Nobby was at length forced to admit, smiling grimly and somewhat wryly at Bill.

"See here, Bill," Larry joined in, for the three were now in a shell-hole together, "ef it was a case of dying hard, so as we might hold the line that meant the safety of our pals yonder, we would be right to do it, and we'd do it willingly. But a live man, Bill, is much better than a dead one, eh?"

"Yep, a live man lives perhaps to fight again, while if he's dead he ain't no longer any use. Nobby's right: there ain't nothin' degradin' in giving in. Things has gone against us."

That was the opinion of them all, though quite loyally they had supported their young leader without a grumble. Yet already more than one of the defenders had paid the price for resisting the enemy, while of the latter quite a number were grovelling lifeless in the surrounding shell-holes. It was a little after noon, therefore, that Bill, tying a somewhat dirty handkerchief to the top of his bayonet, lifted the latter over the top of the shell-hole and waved it. The machine-gun answered it with an angry rattle and then ceased, while a glance over the top showed him an answering signal. Then there came an order shouted in a loud voice: "Stand out, all of you, and advance without your arms. You've put up a good fight and shall have fair treatment."

BILL, TYING A SOMEWHAT DIRTY HANDKERCHIEF TO THE TOP OF HIS BAYONET, WAVED IT

"Fair treatment!" scoffed Larry. "That's a prison, with skilly, with food at which the lowest criminal would turn up his nose. However, we're beggars

this time and can't choose. But, Bill, there's still a chance to get out. Some of our boys has escaped, why not us, eh? We can do what others has done."

"You bet!" Bill answered. "Now, boys, out we go; we've made a fight, there's nothing to be ashamed of!"

Presently they were surrounded by Germans, who, contrary to their expectations, treated them quite fairly. There was no roughness displayed, for, indeed, the two hours or more during which the contest had lasted had filled the enemy with admiration for this sturdy little party. After all, German or no German, the enemy could appreciate bravery. He may be, and is undoubtedly, a cruel and ruthless opponent; he wages war in a manner which has sullied his name for ever, but in individual bravery he is by no means lacking, and he can appreciate similar qualities in his opponent.

Therefore, having placed an escort round the prisoners, the officer marched them away to the adjacent road, and presently sent them along it. Yet Bill and his friends had not quite done with incident. Ere they gained a German prison that evening, they were herded in a camp near by; and, just as the light was falling, observed an aeroplane making ready to take the air and join in the enemy offensive. Yet was it merely for ordinary purposes that this machine made ready to depart? Bill of a sudden grabbed Larry's arm as they stood close to the wire entanglements which surrounded them.

"It's—" he gasped, "it's Heinrich Hilker!" and in his excitement he clutched at the barbed railing.

Larry stared and then started. A second later he clasped his thin fingers firmly round Bill's arm and pulled him back.

"Get hold of him on the other side, Jim," he said hoarsely. "Gee! If that isn't that traitor! If that isn't the man who shot Bill's father way back in the saloon in the Utah mine camp! If that ain't the agent that fired the bomb aboard the ship that brought us to Europe! Come back, Bill; if you shout you'll give yourself away, and the man, once he recognizes you, wouldn't stop at anything. Gosh! what a meeting! And what's he after?"

"After! After!" said Jim, beginning now to fully appreciate the position. "He's getting aboard that aeroplane as a passenger. He's dressed as a

American. You bet he's—he's going off to be dropped in the American lines, where he'll act the traitor again, where he'll be a spy."

"Stop him!" Bill tried to shout, but Larry clapped a hand over his mouth and just stopped him; and there, as they stood, helpless to intervene, they watched the aeroplane take flight, watched the figure of the man they knew to be a despicable spy, dressed in American uniform, steal off into the heavens. Without doubt the man was gone to carry on his nefarious work amongst their unsuspecting comrades.

CHAPTER XVI
Heinrich Hilker, Master Spy

Time sweeps along, and this gigantic contest which has engulfed the world spreads and grows constantly greater. The times in which we live are so momentous, and the incidents so numerous and so close at hand, that one is apt to lose grip of the general situation and to forget, in the vastness of our own responsibilities, that others than ourselves are concerned. Yet it were wise to dissever ourselves for a moment from our own particular and personal interest in this world-contest, and, standing aside as it were in some quiet niche—if one is actually discoverable when the world is aflame—to look out and survey the whole area of operations from that niche or point of vantage. We should see Britain and France, and now America too, locked closely with the enemy along the line of trenches from Nieuport to far-off Belfort on the Franco-Swiss frontier. In Italy we should catch a glimpse of King Victor's hosts, driven back from the Isonzo, in October, 1917, mourning the loss of a fertile province, and awaiting the onslaught of the Austrian hosts along the Trentino front and throughout the whole length of the Piave River.

In Salonika and adjacent parts there would appear British and French and Serbians and Greeks and Italians facing the Bulgarian cohorts. In Palestine, General Allenby's troops beyond Jericho and Jerusalem, in touch with the King of the Hadjiz, steadily driving the Turk before them. Farther east, in Mesopotamia, other British and British-Indian troops, sweeping steadily upward along the courses of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, leaving the Persian frontier behind them, with their right flank thrown out in the direction of the Caucasus. Behind these two last groups of British troops, in Egypt itself, would be seen teeming masses of troops ready to reinforce the Palestine and the Mesopotamian fronts, and prepared at any moment to subjugate the tribes in the western desert should they again venture to rise. But the Senussi have learnt their lesson. Elsewhere the Arabs, stirred up by German agents, and fed and paid by them, have likewise learnt that the

British arm is a strong and a long one, and they too are glad to be at peace with us.

Go east across the ocean to East Africa, where German columns still trek through swampy and forest country, and where British troops, with Indians amongst them, pursue them relentlessly, having already captured practically the whole of this, the last of the German colonies. Then turn to Russia. Was there ever such a wretched country? Revolution having first deposed the Tsar, the Revolutionists have turned upon one another. Armies have disappeared, the German has invaded the Muscovite provinces without difficulty; for while the hand of brother was raised against the hand of brother there were none to oppose the invader. We have dealt already in some detail with this lamentable condition of affairs, and have shown how it reacted on the Western Front, but we have not so far dealt with its meaning in other directions.

Siberia borders China and runs down to the sea which washes the Japanese islands. Not only are Russian revolutionists swarming in these parts, but the many hundreds of thousands of Austrian prisoners and the many thousands of Germans captured by Russia in the early days of the war, when the Russian armies were triumphant, are at large, seizing arms, electing leaders, and at this very period threatening the security of the Chinese provinces across the Siberian border, and the interests of Japan in Manchuria and elsewhere.

Thus as, ensconced in our niche, we look out and survey this world-wide scene, another aspect of affairs is presented to us. China, like many of the South American provinces, indeed as in the case of nearly every nationality throughout the world other than the Central Empires of Europe, has declared war against the Kaiser and his allies, or has severed diplomatic relations with them, while it needs not to be added that the Japanese have long since joined Britain and her allies. But till this stage of the war neither China nor Japan has taken active military steps against the enemy, though the navy of Japan has already lent much assistance. The time has now arrived, however, when China must seriously consider the protection of her Siberian frontier, when Japan must likewise protect her interests on the coast washed by the Sea of Japan.

At this stage of the conflict one is unable to prophesy what will happen in this particular direction; yet, bearing in mind the course of this gigantic war, its constant spread, it seems only reasonable to expect that presently China and Japan will be brought actively into the fighting.

One last point in our survey. The Caucasus, captured in such magnificent manner by the Russians, has now been abandoned by the Revolutionists, and the Armenian people, released from the torture of Turkish rule, have again been thrown into the hands of that remorseless people. Thus, while the outbreak of revolution has dismembered Russia, and brought infinite misery upon the people, it has automatically, as it were, brought even greater misery upon the Armenians. Yet it has not found them irresolute or without strength to protect their homes. As we write, they are fighting the Turk, and may success follow their efforts!

Then let us turn to the active centre of the world-wide contest—to France. We have already set down the outline of the German offensive which commenced on 21st March, 1918, when Bill and Larry and Jim and Nobby and their comrades were engulfed. We can conveniently, then, follow this offensive to its end, and, advancing the story a stage or two, describe events that followed.

The Fifth British Army, opposed to the bulk of the German host, fell back by force of circumstances, fighting a brilliant rear-guard action, while the Third Army, just to the north of it, swung its right flank farther to the west to keep in touch with the left of the Fifth Army. At the same time French troops were rushed forward to reinforce the right flank of the Fifth Army, while American battalions were brigaded with British and French troops, so that, as the Fifth Army retired, its resistance was supported by others, and reinforcements accumulated.

The German drive was presently stopped definitely before Albert. In effect that drive had carried the enemy across the conquered battle-fields of the Somme, and the line now established was that held for so many weary months through the years 1914, 1915, and 1916.

Then followed a short lull and another German offensive in the neighbourhood of Armentières, which carried the enemy over Messines Hill, across the flats of French Flanders, beyond Bailleul, in a big bow

which encompassed Kemmel Hill, the village of Locre, and many other villages from a point south of Ypres down to Festubert to the north-east of Bethune. Once more British and French and American reserves checked the rush, and the Allied line once again held up the enemy advance.

Another pause, more frantic efforts on the part of the enemy, whose policy it was to smash the French and British before American troops could arrive in sufficient numbers, and a third offensive was launched towards the Aisne River, which swept the defenders back right to the Marne and carved out another huge section of French country, till this third wave of advance reached the Marne River at a point thirty-four miles from Paris, encircling Reims to the east, and running from the Marne past Villers Cotterets—scene of British gallantry in 1914—to Noyon.

The position is one to consider for a moment. How had this trio of retreats affected the Allies, and what success had it brought to the Germans? In the case of the former it had caused losses, it had secured country, it had devastated fertile areas, and it had rendered homeless thousands of hapless French people. Moreover, it had brought the Germans within easier striking distance of Paris, on which at least three of their long-range guns had for some weeks now been casting shells. But it had not broken Britain and her allies. Those losses had already been made good, and now, instead of some three or four hundred thousand Americans standing shoulder to shoulder with Britain and France and Italy and Portugal and Belgium, there were a million Americans, with more swarming on ships to cross the Atlantic and come to our assistance.

What then of the Germans? What was in the first place the ultimate aim and object of that first offensive, which, successful enough, we admit, had yet caused them stupendous losses? What was the net result of these three successful attempts, all accompanied by losses, which, if published broadcast and fully known, might well stagger the people of Germany? Ground had been won, prisoners had been taken, but the effort was a failure —a ghastly failure—because its main object had been to smash and drive a wedge in between the British forces to the north and the French troops farther south—a position which would have been pressed to the fullest and which would have enabled the Kaiser to have thrown the whole of his forces upon the British and so overwhelm them.

That had not eventuated; that was the main object of the German High Command, and its failure spelt failure in all directions. Those three offensives had taken time—valuable days had slipped by, valuable weeks had gone, and during those weeks, running into some three months, America, stimulated by the danger, had made good the gaps in the fighting-line of the Allies, and had sent her troops to France in unprecedented manner.

What then of the future? There stood now in France a solid wall of British and French and American troops, with Italians, Portuguese, and Belgians, a wall growing stouter every day as American troops arrived. On the other side of the line there stood a German host, staggered in spite of itself by its losses, shaken by the stupendous task still before it, doubtful of the future, hesitating as to the course it should pursue.

As to the other theatres of war: in Italy another blow was given to the German Alliance, for the Austrians, having staked their all on an offensive, were hopelessly defeated, and Italy was advancing her line across the Piave. Thus July arrived, and with it the crisis of this world-wide conflict.

What of Bill and his friends? What, too, of Heinrich Hilker, the German spy whom they had seen whisked off in an aeroplane, obviously with the intention of landing behind the Allied line, there to mingle with the American soldiers?

"It's—it's——" spluttered Bill, as the machine took the air and went off. "I—we——"

"You shut up," Larry commanded, still gripping him by the arm and beginning to lead him away. "Sakes! D'you want every one of the Germans outside to hear you—to see that something's happened? Come over here! Stuff that into your mouth! Smoke, man! Now, Jim, sit down; we'll have a talk. Nobby, you come across here. Of course you don't understand. Well, sit down; now listen!"

"See here!" said Jim, tapping the huge Nobby on the knee as he sat in front of him, for Larry was now engaged in talking sternly to Bill. "This here is a real drama: our Bill—our young Bill, him as we've been along with these weeks now—was a chum of ours out west in America. There was Germans

there, Nobby; you know as I'm speakin' of times when America wasn't at war with Germany. Them Germans was up to all sorts of stunts—dirty stunts; you get me?"

Nobby nodded. He opened a capacious mouth and popped in the tip of a tiny cigarette, looking almost as though he would swallow it.

"Yep!" he said, unconsciously mimicking Larry.

"Well now, there was a bar down there, and Bill's father was the man in charge of it. One of these here German skunks shot him because he was talkin' about the Kaiser. That man was the man dressed in American uniform that's just gone off aloft in that aeroplane. Say, Nobby, what d'you think a German skunk like that wants to get dressing up in American togs for? What d'you think?"

"Think!" Nobby's brow was wreathed with furrows, his eyes sank a trifle deeper into his head, and for the first time since they had known him he actually scowled. "Think! As if I wanted to think!" he said. "Ain't I been out 'ere these months and months? Ain't we had spies before?—nice, dear old gentlemen, who you'd think were real till you'd stripped them of their beards and some of their clothes. Haven't I known German officers dressed up as old Flemish women? Ain't they tried every game on?—even to dressin' in British uniforms!—and you get askin' me the sort o' question you'd put to a child! 'Ere, Jim, I've took a likin' to you, but if you fling things like that at me, you and I'll part—savvy?"

He blew out a puff of smoke directly into Jim's face, perhaps not very politely; but then on active service the refinements of civilization are not always observable—men think deeply and sometimes forget the niceties they practised at home.

"D'you get me?" asked Nobby, blowing out another cloud of smoke, and becoming quite American in his drawl, "or d'you really take me for a child? —me as 'as been on active service almost since the war begun. So young Bill's father was killed by that dirty scoundrel, eh?" he asked, "and that explains his excitement just now. Bill, boy," he said, holding out a hand and gripping Bill's arm with his huge fingers, "don't you take on, you'll get even with that chap one of these days, and I'll help you. Pull yerself together!

Now let's talk! Of course you mean to escape out of this place—so do we. Of course, you want to get back to your folks as quick as possible, so as to give 'em a warning—well, so do we. You ain't the only one as thinks of such things or worries over the Americans. Well then, we're agreed. Then let's put our heads together and talk it over and make plans and so on."

Nobby sat down, blew his cheeks out, grimaced at Bill, winked at Larry, and jerked his head as much as if to invite Jim to be seated near him.

"Stand up, you English swine!" a German non-commissioned officer shouted at them, using the English language.

"English swine!" Nobby grunted, while his cheeks flushed. "Well, I don't know; suppose you've got to hold yerself in these days, because it don't do to quarrel with the Germans when you're a prisoner—but——" His big fist doubled, while with the other hand he dashed the sweat from his forehead.

As for Bill, he appeared to take no offence at the coarse command. Automatically, as it were, he stood up. All his thoughts were bent upon the scoundrel, Heinrich Hilker, whom he had seen leaving the place on that aeroplane, undoubtedly bound for the American lines. "American lines!" They were the Allied lines; for was not America one of the stanchest of the Allies? and had not he, Bill himself, the closest relationship and friendship for America? Whatever did Heinrich Hilker's presence bode for those friends of his? What danger did it mean? In any case, his presence as a spy could hardly signify anything else but trouble for the Allies, trouble which might lead to disaster.

"It must be stopped. We must get away," he said.

"Sure!" grunted Larry, "but you hold yer jaw, young Bill!" he added, *sotto voce*. "This German chap speaks English, don't you forget it. Perhaps he's been a waiter—most of 'em seem to have been that—and has made a small fortune out of your people or out of mine. That's why he hates us, perhaps; for see how he scowls at us. But escape, boy? Sure we will—eh, Jim?"

Jim merely glanced at them, but as he did so his eyes flashed an answer which there was no mistaking, and he nodded.

"March! No talking! I'll bayonet the man who speaks! Fall in, you dogs! Listen to me. We've broken the British line; we've separated the French and the English. We're marching to Paris. We shall soon have conquered both England and France, and then America shall feel the weight of our blows. Ha, America!"

The German swung round upon the diminutive Larry, and, stepping a pace nearer, stood over him as if he would trample upon him and crush him. Whereat Larry, no doubt unconsciously, felt for his cigar end, and, discovering it had gone, merely stood staring up at this giant, this bully.

"Say, mister!" he said in gentle tones, "you ain't got no call to try and skeere me—I ain't the American army. You won't find the American army and our boys so jolly small as I am. You wait! Marching on Paris, eh? Waal, you ain't there yet, I'll bet. As for whoppin' the British——waal! My! I've seen something of them fellows, and they'll take some whopping! And then you'll beat the Americans. Oh ho, you will! Waal, that too'll want a bit o' doin'."

The man scowled down at him, and, gripping his rifle, lifted it up above his head as if he would dash the butt against Larry's face. Then he thought better of the matter, lowered it, and, finally turning on his heel, marched away. Who knows? The very mildness of Larry's appearance, the gentleness of his voice, may have taken the man by surprise. Or was it that in that gentle and diminutive exterior he had seen something, perceived something hidden before, had grasped some idea, as it were, of the indomitable courage of this gallant American? Yes, it must have been that. Those who looked into Larry's eyes under similar circumstances saw a glimmer there of warning. This was the little man who in the mines was feared by evil-doers. Even as a prisoner he was not to be derided. In point of fact, that swinging butt had caused him to brace every muscle and every sinew. Unknown to the German, unsuspected by his comrades, he was on the point of springing at the man's throat, when luckily the bully turned abruptly.

"I'll know him next time," said Larry in the same gentle tone. "Things then may be a bit more even. Suppose now he's got a gun, and I too. Waal, boys, guess I'll do more than stand still and talk to him."

Nobby's big broad fingers were stretched out, and gripped the frail shoulders of the American. Nobby, broad-shouldered, powerfully built, and perhaps a little obtuse and dull of understanding, could yet realize what had passed in those last few moments. Long since this he had developed an enormous admiration for Larry and his other American comrades, for Bill, too, let us say, and none the less for his British comrades. Larry was such a queer fellow; so calm, so deliberate, so full of pluck and spirit, and yet so fragile in appearance.

"Say, Larry," he gulped, mimicking the American's drawl, "you do get me. Blest if I can understand a chap like you. Now if I was to take you by this same shoulder, I could shake yer as a dog does a rat, and blest if I don't think you look as though you'd fall to pieces. But when you gets a squint at me, I knows that, like the rat, you'd turn and get yer teeth into me, and then it'ud be a fight to the death. Blimey! I'm glad I ain't that German, because some day you'll meet him, that's certain, and then—— Well, as I said, I'm real sorry for 'im!"

"March!" They were hurried out of the barbed-wire entanglements, and presently joined another column of unfortunate prisoners. A few hours later they reached the railway station at Péronne, where they were driven into cattle trucks preparatory to the journey into Germany. That night the train pulled out of the station and lay in a siding. Far off, very far off indeed, they heard the sounds of strife. British guns, American guns, French guns, in the far distance, defending the Allied line against the German rush. Then they lost these sounds as the train which carried them steamed out on its journey.

When would they hear those reassuring sounds again? What chance had Bill and his friends of ever returning to their comrades? And, worst thought of all, what opportunity would they have to circumvent the plans of Heinrich Hilker, the villain who by this time, in all probability, had landed behind the American lines, and was no doubt already fraternizing with those whose destruction he plotted?

CHAPTER XVII
An American Encampment

A small crescent of the moon illuminated the country-side, thrusting pale beams through the mist which rose from the ground, sodden after days of rain, lighting up the roofs of houses, the white walls of barns, camouflaged tents and huts, and gleaming now and again from the wings of an aeroplane soaring over the line. A man in that aeroplane, masked and clad in leather garments, bent forward, tapped his pilot on the shoulder, and spoke to him through the telephone which connected their head-pieces.

"A little lower, Fritz; now to the right. Wait! I think I see the church tower which was to be our mark. No, not that one; farther on. Listen!—there are guns! I saw the flashes down below, so that we are still in the area of operations."

The pilot grunted. He was a huge, broad-shouldered beast-like individual. He turned his head impatiently and growled something into the telephone, though what it was Heinrich Hilker, seated behind him, did not understand. How could he? How could he realize that these gruff words shouted at him contained all the venomous contempt of which the pilot was capable, and yet a contempt which he dared not show too openly.

"This—this Hilker—a spy—yes!" the pilot was saying to himself. "Not that I blame him for that, for it's a dangerous game to play, and calls for courage. But is the fellow honest with anyone at all?—with us, for instance? I doubt it. Yet, what is one to think? For his record for America is splendid, and now he goes to join the Americans again. Bah! it's a dangerous game to play; that is, dangerous for us should he elect to tell the Americans all he knows about us."

So Heinrich Hilker, intriguer, ruffian, rascal that he was, had succeeded in arousing the suspicions of one at least of his compatriots, while certainly he had aroused in the minds of Bill and Larry and his chums something far beyond suspicion. Not that Heinrich Hilker himself cared what others

thought. To him the work that he was engaged on was the height of enjoyment. America, for some unexplained reason, seemed to have aroused all his enmity. Well, Americans were down below there. He would soon be amongst them. A friend—yes, a friend for the moment. And what would his coming portend? Disaster!

He rubbed his gloved hands together and chuckled into the telephone.

"Wait until I get there," he told himself. "Wait till I learn all about them! Wait until my signals bring shells smashing into their batteries! Then they'll know. Then they'll learn what it means to hunt Heinrich Hilker from their country."

"Stop!" he shouted. "That's the church tower! Now steer her to the right, then drop! The ground is clear behind, and you can make a landing."

The broad back in front wriggled and writhed, the strong shoulders heaved upwards. If Heinrich Hilker had been a man of discernment, and less engaged with his own affairs and his own importance, he would have appreciated the fact that that heave, that wriggle, denoted something not altogether pleasant. Indeed it denoted the anger of the pilot, his hatred for his passenger, his indignation with this man who ventured to give him—an experienced pilot—instructions. He growled a reply into the telephone, and, sighting the spot to which Heinrich had referred, sent his machine down in a spinning nose-dive.

"I'll scare the life out of him," he thought. "Let him believe he's about to be dashed to pieces—there!" and he threw his hands up from the "joy-stick".

But Heinrich never even blinked his eyelids. His thoughts were upon the task he had before him, and his eyes were riveted upon the ground. All thought of his own personal safety had left him for the moment, while that heaving of the shoulders in front of him, like the reply the pilot had growled at him, escaped his attention.

"Down!" he shouted. "Faster!"

"Faster! The man's crazy," thought the pilot, pulling his machine out of its spinning nose-dive with some little difficulty. "What if we find a crowd of the enemy there! But the landing-place looks broad enough. Get ready to

move out! I shall drop here like a stone, give you half a minute to dismount, and be off again instantly."

Heinrich's answer was to begin to unbuckle the belt which strapped him securely to his seat, and to make sure that no part of his clothing was entangled in the framework. He bent easily over the side of the fuselage, which was now lying horizontally, and then half rose to his feet as the machine, already within a thousand feet of the ground, shot down at a steep angle. Presently the pilot flattened it, dropped it again, bumped his wheels, and, having already switched off his engine, finally brought the aeroplane to a standstill.

"Au revoir!" shouted Heinrich, for by then the pilot—a skilful fellow—had got his engine going again.

"To the devil with you!" muttered the latter. He waved an arm, turned one glance upon the figure now standing a few feet from his machine, opened his throttle, and went bounding off and so into the air and away from the spot where he had landed.

As for Heinrich, he watched the departure for two minutes, and then, turning, walked towards the church-tower which had been his landmark. It was perhaps a minute later when a man accosted him.

"Say!" someone cried; "halt! Who goes there? Advance and give the countersign!"

"Hundred and forty-first Regiment!" came the prompt answer. "Name—John Miller—American Expeditionary Force, same as yourself, sonny. Say, did you see that aeroplane just now?" he asked, approaching the sentry.

"Yep. Must 'a been one of ours. Thought it landed on the flats yonder, but wasn't certain, and couldn't get a view from just here."

"Good-night, sonny!"

The two men stood opposite one another for just a brief moment, and then Heinrich passed on towards the American encampment which this sentry guarded.

"John Miller—eh? Oh! Just John Miller! Now I'd have sworn——" the sentry told himself as he paced to and fro—a lithe, tall, sinewy young fellow, a magnificent example of American manhood. "Gee, now! Where have I met that chap before?—and not liked him either. John Miller—why, bless us! Now, where?"

He swung his rifle to his shoulder and marched to and fro far more rapidly than the regulations warranted. His beat took him as far as the church tower in one direction, and back to the post to which barbed wire was attached, and which marked the limit of the encampment occupied by his own particular comrades. Something was agitating this fine young fellow—some fleeting memory the essence of which just escaped him. In his mind's eye he could picture the figure—the somewhat sloping shoulders, the rather bullet head, and the particular cast of countenance of this John Miller, who had just answered his challenge, had given him the correct counter-sign without faltering.

That he was not American born he felt quite sure; that he was of alien extraction he was ready to venture upon a wager; but that did not say that John Miller was not an altogether reputable person. For there are thousands of alien-born Americans who are now in the American ranks fighting against the nation which threatens the liberties of all the free peoples of the world. The man's eye absorbed the thoughts of the sentry.

"Same sort of gleaming optic," he said. "Now where? This gets me! I——"

He suddenly halted and grounded his rifle, the butt-end striking the hard earth with a clang. One hand grabbed the muzzle just below the bayonet, while the other went to his waist, where the thumb stuck within his belt. Then a low deep-drawn whistle escaped from between the pursed-up lips of the sentry. He shouldered his weapon, and, turning abruptly, walked with even more decided step toward the guard-tent.

"Sergeant of the Guard!" he called.

Presently a man, taller than himself, with tin hat tilted somewhat over his eyes, turned out of the tent and approached him.

"Aye?" he asked, in brusque yet kindly tones; "what now, Dan? Somethin' special?"

Dan! Could Larry and Jim have caught but a glimpse of this fine young fellow, what shouts of joy they would have given. How they would have rushed towards him and gripped his hands. For this Dan was none other than their chum away in Salt Lake City at the copper-mine—the same Dan whom Heinrich Hilker had shot down in that famous encounter. And here was a coincidence! Dan, recovered of a desperate wound—thanks to his magnificent physique and wonderful health—had volunteered, and had followed his chums across the water. Here he was—tin-hatted, arrayed in khaki, drilled, and thoroughly well informed in matters pertaining to modern warfare—on sentry duty, and for a moment face to face with the man who had done his best to kill him. More than that, that man was a spy—none other than Heinrich Hilker—and Dan, with the swiftness for which he was notorious, had recognized him.

True, the fleeting glance he had obtained of this ruffian as he peered at his face under the thin beams cast by the moon-crescent had given him hardly even an inkling, but it had set some odd corner of his brain at work, had stirred, as it were, some cell in his cerebral matter, which, since the affair in the mine, had until that moment been lying dormant. Dan had caught a glimpse of Heinrich Hilker in a similar way when the light had been thrown full upon him in the heart of the copper-mine, just before Dan himself had been put out of action by the bullet he had fired, and now this second fleeting glance recalled that old memory, and that memory had developed to the point where he recognized that he, Dan, had information of the utmost importance.

"Well, Dan," repeated the Sergeant of the Guard. "Report, eh?"

"Serious, Sergeant. I'd like to go before the officer right now. Will you take me?"

"Jim, there," the Sergeant called, "I want a relief at once. Turn out, Jim!" And straightway he relieved his sentry. "Now, Dan, boy, we'll go right off. Say, Lootenant, this here's Private Dan Holman, same as you know, and he's asked to come along with a report that he considers important."

The officer, who had been hastily summoned—a stoutly-built, thick-set fellow—took a long look at Dan, and answered him in business-like fashion.

"Report, eh? Sentry duty—what? Come over here! Now," he said.

"Confidential, Lootenant," Dan told him. "No offence to the Sergeant, but my report's a matter of no end of importance, not only to you and to me, sir, but to all us Americans. It's a report that a Commander-in-Chief should have right now—the sooner the better."

Those who knew Dan knew him to be a strong and steady and promising young soldier, not the sort of fellow upon whom the moonbeams could have played a trick, or a man given to imagining something out of the ordinary. The officer merely took another glance at him, ordered the Sergeant back to the guard-tent, and, turning upon his heel, led the way to Divisional Head-quarters. There it was that Dan told his story.

"And you recognized this man as a German—a German agent who shot the barman at a saloon near Salt Lake City, and afterwards nearly put you out of action for good? You're sure?"

"Certain, sir!" Dan told him promptly. "I've only had, as you might say, a peep at the fellow once, way over by Salt Lake City, and the second time just now, but I'm as sure as sure! You've a spy landed right here and right now—a spy dressed in American uniform, who speaks English same as you and me—a spy who'd do his utmost to damage the American army."

That the information might well prove of the utmost importance was clear to the Divisional Commander, just as it was to the Intelligence side of his Staff. There followed a discussion, and presently sharp orders were issued.

"We'll muster every man at dawn," the Commander ordered—"every man, whether he's serving with his battalion, or as a cook, or what-not; fatigue parties, men in camp, men in billets—every single man of this division—and we'll call the roll-call from end to end of the camp. If that John Miller's here, we'll get him. 141st Regiment, eh?" he said. "Now how did the fellow get his information? He must have had news from this quarter, for see how he got into the camp! This private will be attached to the Intelligence for the time being. We shall have to hunt for this man, for he's likely to prove, while at large, a real danger."

He was likely to prove, in addition, a spy so cunning as to be not so easily captured as the Commander imagined. Did they think, indeed, that Heinrich

Hilker, a man who had spied in many countries and under varying conditions, would be so easily trapped? Why, even then, as the order was issued for an early morning muster of the whole division, Heinrich heard the news. At the moment he stood at the entrance to a tent, for all the world as though he had just turned out to see whether daylight were coming. He stretched his arms and yawned, and, seeing a sergeant about to pass, hailed him.

"What time o' day?" he asked.

"4.30."

"Be daylight in another hour," he suggested, smothering another yawn.

"Yep, an hour or a little more. There's a muster a half an hour after that—six o'clock sharp—every man-Jack of the division."

"A muster! A blame nuisance! What for?"

"Dunno! It's a blame nuisance, as you say—some! But guess they've got a reason!"

Heinrich guessed also. He stood outside the tent stretching his arms until the man was out of sight, and then, looking about him for a few moments, he sped off into the darkness and presently disappeared from sight. Yet, when the muster was held in the misty early hours of the morning, Heinrich, though absent, though not to be found among the American ranks, was yet within sight of the parade. In a little corner of a church tower, hidden beneath the tiles of the broken roof, lying full length on a truss of straw, placed there for him by a peasant who was his accomplice, he watched the whole scene and chuckled.

"My brave Alphonse!" he said, as the parade he witnessed was presently dismissed. "You see that! These American swine, eh? And you chuckle! Ha! where are you, Alphonse? You are a sly, slippery, cunning fellow."

But a few minutes before, the figure of a man had actually been beside Heinrich, staring out between the cracks in this tower, and pointing and gibing, and then, as the German turned, the man was no longer there. Now, however, as he called, there was just the merest trace of a sound on the

rungs of the ladder which led to this loft in the tower of the church, and half a minute later a long, hooked-nosed visage was thrust over the edge of the floorway, up through the square opening—a leering, bleary, pock-marked face, crowned by a head of hair which was thin at the temples and decidedly so on the crown—the face of an inebriate, followed by the figure of a man who had once upon a time been powerful. Now, creeping and cunning and noiseless in his movements, it was clear from his attenuated frame, from his big bones and joints, his sunken flanks, his thin calves, and his claw-like hands, that the man was no longer what he had been. And what was his nationality? French? Bah! The man spoke like a peasant of those parts, and yet trace his history back.

Alphonse, as he was generally known, had dropped upon this part of the country as if literally from the skies. He had simply arrived there late one evening, when only a young man, and, having put up at a local cabaret for some few days, he presently blossomed forth as the owner of the local forge. Pierre, the man who had controlled the forge for many and many a year, had died, conveniently it seemed, and here was Alphonse installed in his stead—Alphonse, who charged such ridiculously low prices, who did his work so well, who was such a "hail fellow" with all the French farmers and their men—Alphonse, who seemed to have so much money jingling in his pockets, who was so curious about other people's affairs, who travelled now and again to the neighbouring cities, who, it was whispered, had more than once been met by strangers—yet, Alphonse, the shoesmith, who did good work and charged the most reasonable prices.

Years went by, and Alphonse grew older. Perhaps it was the lonely life; perhaps it was some secret grief which preyed upon him. In any case, Alphonse's visits to neighbouring cabarets became more frequent and lasted longer; and here was the result. A fine figure of a man at one time, he was now attenuated, horrid to look upon, while his face was that of a leering, cunning, crafty, and unscrupulous drunkard. Let us whisper more—in his cups, Alphonse spoke German with perfection.

"See!" he said hoarsely, pushing forward a gnarled finger and pointing out through the cracks between the tiles from which Heinrich the spy was peering. "They thought to take you so easily, these Americans! But it is you —no, it is I—who have outwitted them—outwitted them, you hear? and the

wretch broke into a dry, echoing chuckle which reverberated from the tiles around him, and from the walls of the old tower, till Heinrich was startled.

"Peace, you fool!" he growled, turning upon him. Whereat the big, bony fingers of the other man assumed the shape of claws, his brow knitted, and for a moment he scowled at his companion; then he pointed again.

"Outwitted—yes!" he whispered hoarsely, as though fearful that the Americans down below, all unconscious of their presence, might overhear them. "And what a prize! How we shall still further upset their plans! In a little while—in a week or two perhaps—in less for all we know—the signal will come to us; we shall know that our comrades yonder are about to strike once more, and it may be for the last time, for the Fatherland. Then——"

The wretch broke again into that dry, creaking, rusty cackle which grated upon Heinrich's nerves so much.

"Then! What?" he asked abruptly, angrily.

"Then! I'll tell you," the man responded. "We—you and I—will see to it that it is here that our comrades break through. That it is we who discover ourselves to the great German general and claim our reward. Reward! Money, money, money in plenty; far more than the German Government has sent me in these past years that I have lived in this vile country amongst these vile peasants, and have done the bidding of the Fatherland—money with which to live. Ah, that will be worth while!"

Heinrich positively shivered. The man's face acted like a douche of cold water upon him, and then those huge, bony fingers positively gave him the creeps.

"Worth while!" he said rapidly. "Money for what? More visits to the cabaret? Well, we will see; but we must work, and work hard, together."

"Ah! Yes, work hard, as I have worked for years, and you too, no doubt, my comrade, work for the Kaiser and the Fatherland."

Down below American battalions were dismissing—those fine Americans who had come four thousand miles across the Atlantic to meet the barbarians of the twentieth century—were strolling off to their bivouacs,

their cook-houses, their rest-huts, and so on. Not one, perhaps, suspected that so near at hand lay the spy for whom their general was searching; not one, as he cast an eye upward and caught a glimpse of that picturesque yet half-shattered tower, realized that there lay the man whom they were seeking; and he, this Heinrich and the odious creature by his side, boded no good to these gallant men who had come to stand beside the British and their allies.

CHAPTER XVIII
In Search of Liberty

"Getting nearer Germany," said Jim laconically.

Larry kicked the sides of the cattle-truck in which they were incarcerated, pulled that tin hat of his down over his brow—his unconscious yet characteristic habit—scowled and then grinned.

Nobby got angry; he doubled his fist, projected his head until his face was within a few inches of Larry, and growled something at him.

"You're always laughin'—you, Larry," he said. "If we gits into a tight hole, 'stead o' bein' serious-like all the time, you gits a-laughin'. Now, look 'ere!"

Bill took the huge fellow by the shoulder and pulled him back.

"Stop talking rot, Nobby! We're alone for a moment, but you never know when the train'll stop and the guard'll put his head in. 'Nearer Germany,' Jim said."

"Aye—sure," the latter grunted. "I'm thinking of it all the time. Here are we—come all this way, been through all these things—and say, boys, we've enjoyed it, haven't we?"

"Aye, aye," they grunted.

"Well, we've been all through these times waitin' for our boys to come out and join in with 'em, and then we gets scooped up by the Hun, and won't have a chance of seein' all the fightin'."

"No?" lisped Larry. "I ain't so sure. I ain't going to Germany, Jim, not if I can help it. See here, chums! we're gettin' near Germany, and we've got to do something."

That was the sort of speech that pleased Nobby. He grunted his approval. He was the sort of man—steady, strong, and fearless—who was ready to

carry out any sort of desperate enterprise; but to think one out, to make plans, that was entirely beyond the genial, hard-fighting Nobby.

"You get in at it, Bill," for, like his comrades, he had a great appreciation of that young fellow's shrewdness. "How 'ud you do it?"

It was Bill's turn to shrug his shoulders. "Do it?" he asked. "Ah! But chaps have jumped from a train before now—eh? What's to prevent us?"

"Them doors!" declared Nobby, pointing to the iron-bound doors which had been bolted on them.

"Aye, but there's a roof and a floor," said Jim.

"Sure!" Larry exclaimed, beginning to peer about him in the semi-darkness of the truck.

The very suggestion, patent though it was, brought them all to their feet, and for the next few minutes they were walking about the truck, feeling in all directions, they and half a dozen comrades with them. Then came a sharp, shrill cry from one of the men.

"What is it?" demanded Nobby roughly. "Ah! A loose board! Let's get there! Loose at one end. You wait—get out of the way! Christopher! It's coming!"

Nobby came with it too! For, getting his fingers underneath the end of the board which one of the men had discovered to be loose, he threw all his bull-like strength into it, tore the board up, and fell backward. But a moment later he was on his feet again, and had his fingers at the next board to that which was already wrenched out of position. This one, too, came away to the sound of thudding, thumping iron wheels on steel rails, and to the sound of splitting timber. A third time he ventured to pull, and there, at his feet, lay a hole through which three men could have gone together, a hole through which what little light there was outside penetrated, a hole which might easily lead to liberty, perhaps even to the road back to their comrades.

"There!" exclaimed Nobby, mopping the sweat from his forehead with the dirty sleeve of his khaki jacket.

"Sure!" grinned Larry, peering over the hole and watching the ground fleeing away from them.

"Interesting!" Jim ventured, lying flat on the floor, his head thrust through the square which Nobby's powerful fingers and muscles had provided for them. "But this here raises a conundrum; droppin' through on to the road would mean getting smashed by the axle of the wagon just behind it. One man might have a bit of luck, but t'others would get brained. Here's the hole right enough—but yet——"

"But, yes," said Bill thoughtfully.

"Ha!" gurgled Nobby, pushing his way nearer to them now that he had recovered from his effort, while other men pressed round them.

"Only," ventured Bill, breaking the long silence which followed, "only, you know——"

Nobby interrupted him. "I know what you're after, young Bill," he said. "It's always you as is makin' plans and thinkin' things out while the rest of us is puzzling. You shut up, mates; give him a moment to think. Now then!" he said when a few more minutes had passed—passed painfully, be it mentioned; for the opening at their feet, the gleam of light which came through it, the swiftly-passing road it disclosed, were tantalizing to the prisoners. In a measure their cage was broken open and they were free to go; but that rushing train, the swiftness of its pace, made escape from their open cage still an almost impossible matter.

"Only it ain't altogether impossible," said Bill. "No, not altogether."

"Ah! Oh!" Nobby gurgled.

"You see," said Bill, "a chap might sling himself out here with his head to the back of the wagon. T'other chaps would then hold his two legs and his two hands, so that he could get his head 'way out under the last beam and take a squint round. There'll be buffers, perhaps—that's certain in fact; there'll be couplings, perhaps there'll be handles. He'll get slung back here and give directions; and then out he goes again, and you chaps'll let go one hand, when he shouts or wriggles you'll let go the other, and the fellows

with the feet'll help him to move backward; finally one leg will go, then the second, and after that——"

"Ah! ah!" lisped Larry. "Yep, it is after that. You ain't yet out of the wood—not by a long bit. Say, sonny, it's a bright idea; it's a really bright brain-wave, but——"

"Here, catch hold!" said Bill with decision. "Larry, you stand by and direct operations. Jim will hold one hand, Tom, here, the other. Nobby's the boy for the legs; I should be safe, I know, if he'd got a grip of 'em. Now then, swing me down. Don't be frightened! Here I go!"

And go he did. They gripped him by all four extremities and lowered him through the opening as they would have lowered a bundle or a bed, then very carefully they allowed his form to drift, as it were, backward till his head was under the farthest edge of the wagon. Peering up through a cloud of dust, which almost smothered him, Bill caught sight of a coupling clanging just overhead, and, on either side, of buffers, as he had suspected. Better than all, there was a strong iron handle or grip beside the coupling, and one immediately opposite it on the next truck, while below it was a foot-rest by means of which one could mount the side of this truck, which, like the one in which they were, was covered. He wriggled, and at the signal was hauled back.

"Waal?" demanded Larry hoarsely, while Nobby leaned over the opening and peered into his face, breathing heavily on him.

"Can't say," came from Bill, "only the trick can be done right enough. Next time I'll clamber along and see if the doors can be opened. Now you swing me down again, holding my wrists and ankles. When I double up my right hand, let it go, and keep me as far swung back as you can. When I've got a grip I'll move the other hand and you can let that go too. I'll jiggle my feet in turn as I want you to liberate 'em—get me?"

"You bet!" Nobby grunted. "Got you square! Take care, young Bill, now. We don't want to see you dashed to pieces, but——"

"But someone's got to do it," said Bill, "and I'm as active as any one of you and fairly light. Down I go! Hang on tight. And don't be afraid to let go when you get the signal."

He was swung through the opening again, and then allowed to drift backward. Once more he caught a glimpse of the clanging couplings just above his head, and of the grating buffers on either side. Then, measuring his distance, he closed the fingers of his right hand, and rather reluctantly that member was released, while he felt the grip on the ankles and the other wrist tighten as if the men were fearful of his escaping from between their fingers. Then he reached upward and without difficulty gripped the first of the handles. Shifting his grasp along it, he then closed the fingers of the other hand, and a minute later was holding on to the single broad handle, while the men inside the van allowed his form to drift still farther backward.

There was team work there between them all—intelligent team work. For though Larry and Jim and the others could not see what Bill was attempting, they could imagine it well enough, and the writhings of his body gave them a hint as to how they were to behave under every circumstance. Yet it was not without reluctance that they let his right leg loose, as he wriggled the ankle, and Nobby, who released it, was more than relieved when Jim, bending over the hole, called to two of them to grip his wrists, and was himself lowered through the opening, head downward, his feet and legs resting on the floor of the wagon. Twisting his head, he could see Bill's right leg swing backward, and presently watched as it was hooked over the foot-rest. Then came another wriggle of the other ankle, and a minute later Bill had practically disappeared, one leg only still showing hooked over the foot-rest.

By the time Jim had been hauled back, Bill had gone, and those within were left staring at the ground below fleeing past them. It seemed ages before there was a clang at one of the doors—the clang of a bolt being shot backward. Then a crevice of light appeared, and, to the amazement and joy of all, a hand was pushed into the compartment—a hand which Nobby gripped and presently drew on—drew on until he finally pulled Bill in amongst them.

"So you did it! Bravo!" he cried, while Jim pushed the sliding door, which Bill had liberated, farther back. As for the latter, he grinned upon his comrades.

"Easy as eating dinner," he said. "There wasn't a padlock, but only bolts, and they didn't take much opening. After that the trick was done. Here we are, boys—there's the road to liberty—only, of course, we've got to slow the train up first. Another conundrum I hadn't thought of."

"I have," Jim joined in. "See here, boys, this train may go rushing on for hours yet, and every foot of the way takes us farther into Germany. You might shout yourself hoarse and the driver of the locomotive would never hear. If we was to take those planks that we've torn from the floor and chuck 'em on the rails, they'd be cut up like carrots, and wouldn't no more derail her than if you was to chuck out Nobby there."

At that the worthy and pugnacious Nobby looked threateningly at the American, and opened his mouth to expostulate.

"No," went on Jim, in deep earnest, unmindful of what he had said, "you couldn't wreck the train if you wanted to. So next thing is to stop her."

"Aye, stop her!" Nobby grinned. "Ain't we all aware o' that? Clever, Jim—eh?"

"And to stop her," said Jim, unperturbed by Nobby's sudden explosion, or by his sarcasm, "ain't such a difficult task, I should reckon. Bill's done his bit; you boys wait here while I do my share; I'm going to uncouple the chains right here in front of us."

That, too, was no easy matter. Indeed it was one full of danger, as Jim himself appreciated when he gained the end of the truck, and, standing upon the foot-rest and clinging to the handles, endeavoured to manipulate the couplings. The truck in front wobbled and swayed horribly; that upon which he rested jerked to and fro, threatening to throw him from his hold, and the couplings were drawn tight—so tight that there was no possibility of unhooking them—while the buffers were parted by an inch or more of space. And so the position continued for a long ten minutes—those coupling chains in strongest tension, the buffers separated, no power that he could exert, nor indeed that a hundred men could exert, being able to unhook them.

And then came the sudden scream of the vacuum brakes, the buffers tapped gently together, and at once the ends of the two trucks between which he

clung drew closer together. They were on a decline, and the driver of the engine had applied his brakes all along the train to keep her in control and steady the trucks as they ran downwards. As for the couplings, taut a moment before, they swung loosely now, so that Jim, bending over, picked up the link hooked upon the coupling in front and threw it off with an ease which surprised him. That link provided the only means of attaching them to the forward part of the train, and when, perhaps a minute later, the long line of trucks had gained the level again, and steam was given to the engine, of a sudden the truck in front leapt away from him, sped away, rushed off at uncommon speed, leaving Jim clambering there with only space in front of him.

It was a very hot and dishevelled Jim who clambered back into the compartment, and it was a very dishevelled and excited party that stood at the open doorway as the speed of this latter half of the train slowly diminished. Then anxiety took possession of them, for far away in the distance they heard the shrill whistle of the locomotive—the locomotive which had dragged the train from which they were now parted.

"Driver's discovered it—sure! Yep. Awkward! That means that he'll stop the blamed train, and perhaps come back to us—what's that, eh?"

"Conductor right behind has wakened up and made the same sort of discovery," said Bill; "reckons the train has broken in half—as it has—eh? There go the hand-brakes. Couldn't ask for anything better. Boys, make ready!"

From outside the car came the scream and scrape of brakes, while the landscape, which had been flashing past them, now glided by at respectable speed, which encouraged the prisoners immensely. They crowded to the door, waited till Bill gave the order, and then, as the car slowed down to quite reasonable speed, that made a leap to the ground quite practicable, they dropped off one by one—some fifteen of them—and presently, gathering together, moved off along the track. But first of all, as the last man left the car he had been careful to close the doorway.

"You never know," said Bill, as he warned them. "Perhaps they'll think that putting the brakes on down that decline somehow unhooked the coupling. If they saw the door open they'd realize at once that a trick had been played on

them. Let 'em talk about the breaking in two of the train and wonder how it happened, and get to work to hook the two trucks together again. Perhaps they won't suspect that we've got out, for there won't be anything to tell 'em. Now, boys, here we all are! About turn! Quick march! This trek ought to take us, with a little more luck, into the lines of the Allies."

CHAPTER XIX
Plots within Plots

"You're sure—certain, Private Dan Holman?" the Divisional Commander asked him for perhaps the twentieth time, some two or three days after that parade which had followed the discovery of the presence of a spy in the midst of this particular American division. "Certain you'd recognize him? Remember, boy, you caught only one single glimpse of him, and that under torchlight. A man looks queer under the glare of a searchlight—different from what he looks under the moonbeams."

Dan gulped. Even an American soldier, with all that assurance born of the freedom of the vast country in which he lives, may feel disconcerted under the gaze of a superior officer, indeed under the gaze—the almost incredulous gaze—of a number of officers. Dan gulped, therefore, but his eyes, steadily fixed on those of the Commanding Officer, never wavered.

"Sure, sir," he answered. "It sounds queer, I know, but I've laid in bed thinking it over, and I'm as sure as sure—surer than I was when I first came along with the information. That man that came down in the aeroplane—for I take it he was dropped, as the Germans have dropped spies before—was the same man that shot the father of a chum of mine way back in a saloon by the copper-mine near Salt Lake City, the same chap as drilled me through with a bullet from a revolver. I ain't dreamin'; the thing's sure; and the fellow's somewhere about in these parts dressed in our uniform."

A long and secret discussion followed. Dan was closeted with the Intelligence Branch of the division for many hours, and on more than one occasion, and thereafter, though the life of the camp was unaltered, though nothing untoward seemed to be occurring, and though the ordinary rank and file and their officers were entirely ignorant of what had been or of the suspicions in their Commanding Officer's mind that a spy was lurking in the neighbourhood, active steps were being taken to come upon Heinrich Hilker.

"We'll telephone along to the other commanders, and notify the French and the British; we'll get every billet, every hut, even the woods searched. If the chap's in the neighbourhood we'll see if we can ferret out the hiding-place he's selected. Gee! it makes me feel uneasy to think that there's a spy somewhere here—a fellow that knows all about us Americans. What's more, it makes me feel worse to believe that he's got an accomplice; for otherwise how could he have slipped through our clutches when we guessed his presence within a few minutes of his arrival?"

Up and down the line, from the trenches to a point some miles behind, French and British and American military police and Intelligence branches caused the closest search to be made—a search which naturally enough included that church in which Heinrich Hilker and Alphonse, a spy like himself, had taken shelter. But granted that Heinrich himself was cunning, Alphonse was still more so. One of that band of individuals sent out broadcast by Germany to penetrate peacefully the countries of their neighbours, to prepare the ground in case of a German invasion, and to keep Berlin informed as to all local affairs and on every matter of importance, Alphonse had lived the life of a schemer for many years. He, in fact, chuckled on numerous occasions at the ease with which he had hoodwinked the simple peasants with whom he had taken up his residence. Even in his cups he had, as a general rule, been extraordinarily careful and crafty; and now, as he went his way, unsuspected by the Americans, his craft and his guile allowed of his throwing dust in their eyes also.

"You've got to stay here," he told his accomplice as he visited him one night in his lair at the top of the tower. "Here's better than anywhere else, because every billet is being searched. There isn't a hut, an outhouse, or any farm or hovel in these parts and right along the line that isn't being looked into. They've been to the church, too, but——" and then he began to cackle, that horrid cackle which grated upon Heinrich's nerves so much.

"But!" the latter ejaculated curtly; "what then? How is this place secure? Tell me," he asked anxiously; for indeed he had observed much coming and going of American soldiers, had seen staff cars arriving bearing French and British officers, and, though that was no unusual occurrence, he could guess from the bustle which he could see and note from his peep-hole, that something unusual was happening.

"But——" began Alphonse again, crouching beside the spy, his huge knuckles taut as he clenched his fists, "but——" and then cackled once more, so that Heinrich could have hit him so great was his vexation.

"But—you fool! Go on!"

"S—sh! Steady! Men down below, I hear them."

Heinrich had heard not so much as a sound, but the crafty villain beside him had spent years in eavesdropping—in listening and avoiding people whom it was undesirable he should meet—and now, above the gentle rustle of the straw in which he lay, he heard the distinct murmur of voices, the slip and slither of booted feet, the sound of men in the body of the church. He lifted a finger to his lips, and, turning silently with a snake-like movement, bent over the square opening leading to the loft. Lights were flashing down below. He could see men walking about, catching only a glimpse of them as the flash of an electric torch settled upon their figures. He heard steps on the broken and wrecked stone stairs which led to the chamber down below, and then he became active. Those powerful if attenuated arms of his were stretched out, the two hands gripped the rickety ladder by which he had ascended, and swiftly, yet with the utmost care and silence, he drew it upward. To cover the opening with some straw was an easy matter, and presently, long before the American soldiers arrived in the chamber referred to, the square through which Alphonse had entered Heinrich's hiding-place had been, as it were, obliterated. So much so, that though the light was cast upward, the broken boards above, the wisps of straw dangling through the crevice, the wrecked appearance of the place, in fact the very stars visible through the shattered tiles above, and the lack of all means of reaching this aerie, persuaded the searchers that no spy could be lurking there.

"Empty—sure!" came a voice. "'Taint likely that he's here. Looks as though the tower might fall to pieces any moment. So down we go! Easy with it, boys, those stairs take a lot of climbing."

Sounds receded. Footsteps were heard again in the body of the church. Lights flashed hither and thither and then disappeared. Silence followed, except that from outside came again the murmur of voices as the soldiers departed. Heinrich breathed freely once more, while Alphonse gave vent to a deep-throated, husky cackle.

"And so I cheated 'em time and again," he breathed, his eyes riveted now to a crevice between the tiles through which he could see the search-party of the Americans receding, "cheated 'em—these fools of French peasants—same as I'll cheat the soldiers down below, and help Germany to gain Paris—to gain Paris," he repeated, this time with something approaching a hiss, his eyes flashing. "Paris, my friend Heinrich!"

His companion, who a little while before had shrunk from contact with this bony, attenuated scoundrel, and who, to speak the truth, was half fearful of him, now actually put up with a grip of his fingers as they closed round his arm, and, crouching on his knees, Heinrich Hilker repeated that word.

"Ah!" he said, "Paris! Paris!—ah! that is the aim we have! But listen, Alphonse! We failed to drive a wedge between the British and the French, we failed to reach the Channel ports, but there is always Paris—the heart of France and the French people. Let us but reach it, let us but get our fingers about it, and—ah!—and we will strangle the life out of these Frenchmen."

His eyes blazed. Sitting there he gripped his two hands together, squeezing the palms and interlocking his fingers, feeling as though he had already a strangling grip upon our gallant ally. Thereafter the two lay quietly together discussing matters in whispers, and had there been someone at hand to hear their words, what a commotion would have resulted when the information was transmitted to the Americans and sent to the French and British armies. For Heinrich had penetrated into the Allied line with the knowledge that presently Germany was to try another onslaught. His duty it was to obtain further and more intimate information, and once he had secured it he was to return by any means available and repeat that information to the German High Command.

But the time had not yet arrived. So close was the hunt for Heinrich, thanks to the report which Dan Holman had given his Commanding Officer, that he was held a close prisoner in the tower, and would have starved, indeed, had it not been for the crafty and creeping Alphonse.

"But never mind," he told the latter one day some two weeks later. "Thanks to this note which one of our aeroplanes dropped, and which you brought to me, I know that our people are prepared. The blow will fall shortly; not, you understand, my friend, the great blow—the big blow that will take us and

our armies to Paris—but the preliminary one, just to open the way, to give us elbow room, to let us bring on the forces which will then dash on to the city. Alphonse, that will be the time for you. Dream of it—a German army in Paris! Think of what you and I will do! Think of the loot!—of the gold! of the jewels!—think!"

The big, bony rascal beside him sat up abruptly to think. His eyes were sunken, only half filling the enormous sockets, and they were staring out into the darkness of the farthest corner of the tower. "Ah!" the wretch gasped, and, catching a fleeting glance of him a moment later, Heinrich felt almost alarmed, for those staring, sunken eyes had a suspicion of madness in them; the man's intent face, his hook-like nose, his parted lips and gaping nostrils made him look like a vampire, and then the hoarse dry cackle which followed completed the illusion. Heinrich shuddered.

"The man is mad," he thought; "he is a devil. He lives for gain, and would perpetrate any cruelty to make money. Well, soon I shall be quit of him; soon he will have carried out his purpose, and I shall have no further need of him. That will be a good day. I am tired of this dog-kennel."

They became bolder as the days passed and search on the part of the Americans practically ceased. They wormed out numerous secrets, and by means of craftily-arranged signals, and with the help of an aeroplane which once more descended close to the tower, they transmitted information to the enemy. It was then that of a sudden the Germans flung themselves upon the Chemin des Dames, which overlooks the Aisne River, and thrust forward across the ground where the British Expeditionary Force of 1914, that "contemptible" yet ever glorious army, fought its way across the river. They swept south to Fère en Tardenois, and even gained the Marne, though they were unable to cross it. Yet they had achieved a huge success, a sudden advance, which caused stores and guns and men to fall into their clutches, and which won for them a closer approach to Paris, now but thirty-five miles distant, indeed but half the distance of the range of those gigantic guns humorously called "Big Berthas", able to project shot seventy miles, which for weeks past had been playing upon Paris.

It was the first milestone, one may say, on the road to the capital city of France. A success to be followed up as rapidly and violently as possible. It

was a time when information of French military preparations to protect their beloved city would be of the utmost assistance to the Germans, and a time, therefore, when the activities of Heinrich and Alphonse redoubled.

"We must get through! We must find our way past these American curs to the Marne, and so into the German lines. These American curs, I tell you," Heinrich said, "they suspect something. The search-parties are about again, and for me, I feel that if we remain here longer we shall be taken. So to-night we move on. You agree?"

He cast a half-nervous glance over his shoulder, for, to tell the truth, longer acquaintance with Alphonse had made him even more fearful of that strong, uncouth individual; and what wonder? For the strained life which this agent of the German Government had lived so many years among the people of France had tended to throw him off his mental balance; loneliness had preyed upon his mind, and those frequent visits to the cabaret had not assisted to retain his mental powers in equal balance. There were times, though Heinrich hardly guessed it, when Alphonse raved, when he was apt to be violent, when that dry, harsh, cruel chuckle of his became the scream of a madman. Now, as Heinrich turned upon him, the man was kneeling up, bent forward and leaning upon his closed fists—those huge, bony fists of his—his chin pushed forward, his lips agape and teeth showing, his sunken eyes staring at nothing in particular. He chuckled hoarsely, and then turned swiftly upon the German.

"The time—" he said, "the time to return, to cross the Marne to our people—yes, for you, Heinrich, but for me, no!"

"For you, no?" the other asked incredulously; "but——"

"But Paris, man," Alphonse gurgled.

"Paris! of course, of course!" Heinrich laughed, though there was little merriment in his tone. "Of course, later on, with our comrades as they advance over the Marne. In the meanwhile you are the man to guide me back to them."

The big, sprawling, bony figure of the man beside him was jerked upward and that pugnacious chin shot towards Heinrich Hilker, while the deep-set eyes gleamed—gleamed dangerously.

"What, leave Paris! the loot!" the man gasped, as if the news astounded him. "Direct you over the Marne to our comrades! Get behind the advanced lines of our troops, and so reach Paris after they have entered! What, lose that splendid opportunity! Man—!" and Alphonse brought a huge, bony hand down on Heinrich's shoulder, making the spy wince. "Man, it's a moment I have lived for—dreamed of night and day—this pillage of Paris. Why, I have been there a hundred times and have marked out the way of entry, the path I would take first of all, the spot for which I would make, the spot where—— Listen, listen, man!" he whispered in his rusty voice; "the place where all the gold and the jewels are concentrated. It will be a haul. A bomb to burst in the door, no *poilus* to intervene, none of these infernal soldiers to shoot at you, no fear of watchers—a plain straightforward action, careless of who looks on. A bomb I say—the door burst in—then a dive in amongst the riches—jewels, man, sparkling jewels—pockets filled in five minutes—afterwards, wealth—wealth of a Crœsus!"

Heinrich was peering round at his companion now—peering in a cunning, half-frightened way, his eyes now and again turning to those sunken orbs which stared into the farthest hole beneath the shattered tiles of the church tower. He could feel the hand on his shoulder trembling; the bony fingers closed and gripped him with such force that he could have called out for pain. The man beside him was a maniac, he told himself—a maniac to be got rid of at the first opportunity, but a man to be handled carefully, to be cajoled, to be humoured until he had carried out the work required of him, and "after that a shot will finish the brute", Heinrich whispered, "a shot in the back. Once we are across the Marne, and with our people, Alphonse shall go to a place where he can dream on for ever. Only—ah, yes!"

THE MAN BESIDE HIM WAS A MANIAC, HE TOLD HIMSELF

Heinrich Hilker's eyes sought the depths of that dark corner just as Alphonse's had done. For a moment or so he became thoughtful, moody,

while the expression of his face denoted cunning, slyness—the cunning of a man who has suddenly thought of something worth noting.

"And why not? A shot? Yes—in the back. But first this path into Paris—a place full of riches. Alphonse may be crazy, but he is a cunning fellow, and—yes, he has been thinking of Paris often. Listen!" he said aloud a few moments later; "this scheme of yours, Alphonse—splendid! magnificent! Riches beyond thought, and all obtained in five minutes and quite openly, without fear of arrest. But supposing the Army Commander places a guard on all public buildings, and private also?"

"Ha!" Alphonse's face grew black—grew terrible, while his strong teeth grated together. "Ha!" he grunted.

"But," went on Heinrich, "get back to our army now with this valuable information and I can obtain a special pass which will send us ahead with our advanced troops. You would not mind, Alphonse? For, as you say, there are riches there to make both you and me rich beyond belief, tell me—eh? We go back to our people now, and your chances of getting that wealth will be improved. It is a magnificent suggestion."

It was. It captured the fancy of the madman beside him on the instant, and set him rubbing his two big bony, attenuated hands together, while the man sat up on his heels, and, still staring into that dark corner, chuckled hoarsely, his rusty voice awaking the echoes of the deserted tower.

See them then two days later creeping away from the place disguised as peasants; watch them a day later dressed as *poilus*—the one driving a cart in which Alphonse lay at full length, for no helmet, no blue uniform, could disguise the bony Alphonse. See them far up towards the Marne, and watch them as they take shelter in a hovel, already badly battered by German guns, within easy reach of the river, within almost calling distance of the Kaiser's troops on the far bank.

Let us look about the spot where those two ruffians had taken shelter. Situated in "No-Man's-Land", under the German guns and under those of the Allies, it offered no great security from shell-fire, though it afforded as it were a jumping-off post from which anybody secreted there might reach the Germans in one direction and the watching Allies in the other. Yet, what

a coincidence that Bill and Jim and the inimitable Larry, with the formidable Nobby, too, close at hand, should have almost at the same moment discovered a little dwelling, likewise battered, within a hundred and fifty yards of that spot—Bill and his friends, whose fortunes and misfortunes now claim our attention.

CHAPTER XX
A Turn in the Tide

Weeks had passed since that train had thundered along the rails into Germany, carrying its truck-loads of British prisoners. It was ages since the brilliant and powerful Nobby had wrenched up the flooring of the truck and had thereby discovered an opening, which might or might not lead to liberty, and it seemed a positively endless period since Bill had been swung out by hands and feet, since Jim had thrown off the couplings, since the moment when this gallant little band had escaped from their captors and had plunged towards the west, where lay friends and safety.

But consider the difficulties before them. That part of Germany was not so thickly populated that movement of a band of men was out of the question; across the Rhine Germans swarmed—German soldiers—while farther west, in the invaded French territory, the movement of a mouse was almost likely to be noted.

"It's got to be a slow game," Bill said, when after their first night's journey they lay down in a wood, hungry and feeling desolate. "Of course we may have unusual luck, but there's little doubt that we shall have to go quietly and very secretly. Let's sleep, boys, then we'll forage for food, after that—well, leave it."

"Aye, leave it," laughed Nobby—laughed uproariously, for this gallant fellow was in the highest spirits. "As for taking time and all that, what's it matter, so long as we do get back one of these days? Seems to me, slow but sure—the pace of a tortoise—is the thing we're out for. But food! crikey, ain't I hungry!"

"Aye!" gasped another of the band, a lusty eater like Nobby himself. "But there'll be food round about, and we'll take it—eh, Bill?—eh, Sergeant Bill?—sorry, Sergeant!"

Bill laughed. Yet it was a sign of the times. These comrades of his were becoming a little careful how they addressed him. Perhaps the feeling of

discipline had something to do with it, and perhaps it was the fact that they recognized in Bill a born commander, the sort of young man of which our officers are made, and let us say at once we include the officers of all the Allies.

Then they lay down, and presently all were asleep, nearly all indeed slept heavily till the early morning. Sounds of someone approaching, and the sudden appearance of a cow and a calf with a soldier behind them, threw the band into a commotion. The men seized the sticks with which they had armed themselves, Larry dashed towards a tree; then the soldier laughed.

"My! Ain't I frightened the whole lot o' you," he shouted. "A-feared of Nobby and a couple of cows a-walkin' into the camp, and lookin' as though you'd like to chuck 'em out, when I'm bringing food, too."

The gallant Nobby, for he it was, hurled two fowls in amongst his comrades. "Didn't know I was a sort of gamekeeper in peace times, did yer? I'd almost forgotten it meself, for them days seems a long way off; but I chanced to wake at the first streak of dawn, and went off to see what was around us. This 'ere cow and calf was mighty handy. Right down below there's a settlement, and I happed on a convenient Hun residence. What's this—eh? Why, bless me soul!—it's bread! My, I am surprised! Believe me, when I saw that in the larder of a house—a farmhouse, you know—I felt like leaving it for the Huns. Then I thought of you chaps, and I guessed it 'ud do you more good than it 'ud do any German. Sit up, boys. Here's milk and meat and bread for to-day; to-morrow, if we can't move off, we can kill the calf, and there'll be more meat for a week perhaps; after that—well, we'll be able to look round by then, eh? What about some breakfast?"

"What abaht it?" one of the band sang out, while the rest were convulsed with laughter or ran forward to congratulate the gallant Nobby.

Indeed his was a find—a valuable find as it proved. For it so happened that though the band had managed to escape to a part of the country which was sparsely populated, their escape was noised abroad, and search-parties were sent in all directions.

"Only they don't seem to have thought of these woods," said Larry, as he and Bill watched from the fringe of the cover in which they had taken

shelter. "I guess they think we've made along the railway. Waal now, the longer we stick here without moving into the open the better, for then we'll throw them off the scent. Nobby's calf will be useful. Mebbe we'll take to the cow yet, but it'll want some killing, seeing that we've only sticks and knives with us."

Yet another early-morning jaunt on the part of Nobby, with Bill in company, secured a couple of old rifles and revolvers, beside more bread; and thus armed, and with plenty of food, the band settled themselves in the wood for two weeks till the search-parties had returned and the matter had blown over. Then they issued forth, and little by little, sometimes gaining a dozen miles in one night, sometimes lying up in a friendly wood for a week or more, now and then half starved—for provisions were short throughout the whole of Germany—and again well fed—for they did not hesitate to take fowls and calves when they came across them—the band gained France, and finally filtered through the German lines to the spot we have indicated.

The journey had taken weeks—those eventful weeks during which the Kaiser, careless of the losses he incurred, had thrown his hordes against the Allies, had thrown to win, and so far at least had failed to achieve his object. But now the moment for the last throw had arrived. Germans, massed in that salient which stretched to the Marne, were about to make a desperate push—a last push for Paris. Guns were ready; every device of war was there to slaughter the Allies; the All-Highest, himself less arrogant than of yore, less certain of success, was himself present; the hour had come for Germany to strike a final blow for victory.

And strike she did, driving a reckless path over the Marne River in the neighbourhood of Château Thierry and to the east of that pleasant provincial town, while her forces swept to the west, pushing the Allied line backward. It was a critical time for British and French and American troops, and the Entente generally; for the rush carried the Germans to within some thirty miles of Paris, and further success would have thrown a road to that city wide open, with, no doubt, disastrous results to the defenders of human liberty. But the Allies, though taken in some measure by surprise, were by no means found wanting. Unity of command on the part of Germany and Austria and their Allies had, during almost four long years of warfare, given enormous advantage to the troops controlled nominally by the Kaiser: one

brain and one man, in fact, commanded the situation, striking blows here, following them up swiftly, supporting a threatened spot, and massing effects where the Allied line appeared weakest. But the Allies themselves had not failed to see the vital importance of this unity of command. It had taken time; it had required many conferences; there had been much discussion before a decision was reached; but Mr. Lloyd George, the Premier of England, Monsieur Clemenceau, France's able leader, and Mr. Wilson, the President of the United States, and all the prominent leaders had come forward and insisted upon this one condition.

Thus, just prior to this final German rush, the whole of the Allied armies in France and Italy had been placed under the command of General Foch, the hero of the Marne fighting in 1914. This unity of command placed in his hands a power not hitherto wielded by any single one of the Allied forces. It allowed him to mass his reserves, to control the movements of all the troops, and permitted of his disposing of his forces so that within a few days the enemy rush was successfully held up, and almost at once a counter-attack, similar almost to that of the Sixth French Army in 1914, which was cast upon the right flank of Von Kluck's army, but a little north of the part where that army operated, was hurled against the flank of this dangerous German irruption.

A few lines and we may dismiss further mention of the fighting. French and British, aye, and Americans in much force, took part in that brilliant counter-offensive. They smashed in the German flank, they drove deep into the Tardenois, they sent the enemy fleeing back from the Marne and its wrecked villages and towns, till his back was against the Aisne, and until the Vesle alone divided the combatants. That single dramatic movement smashed the hopes of the German people, and wrecked for ever the already severely damaged prestige of the once arrogant Crown Prince of Prussia.

We will carry the tale a short stage further. The fighting in this neighbourhood was scarce ended, and the fifth year of the war but just commenced, when on the 8th August, the Fourth British Army, with a French army acting in combination with it, suddenly advanced upon the Germans between Albert and Montdidier, and assisted by numerous small tanks, called "whippets"—more speedy and more efficacious than the big tanks first used in 1916—drove a huge hole or salient into the German

position, capturing hundreds of guns and a vast number of prisoners. Since then fighting has extended north and south, and all along the line the invader—the ravager of France and Belgium—has been driven back reeling before our blows. The tide has turned without a doubt. The Allies march irresistibly on to final victory.

Thus was the fifth year of this awful contest inaugurated. It brought success to the Allies, it found their numbers increasing daily by the influx of American troops, and, significant too, it discovered those American troops to be stanch and sturdy fighters, fresh to the country, keen to destroy the power of the Kaiser.

As for Bill and his friends, that sudden irruption of the Germans over the Marne swamped the hovels in which they were lying, swamped, too, the shattered dwelling in which Heinrich Hilker and Alphonse lay in waiting. It drove both parties in fact to the cellars, and thence into the subterranean passages which joined them. There, late one morning, it brought the two parties face to face; though, to be sure, Heinrich and Alphonse were as yet unaware of the presence of Bill and his party.

"It's a noise! It's someone around!" said Nobby, when the party had sat in the dark cellar for perhaps a couple of hours listening to the roar of guns above, and sometimes hearing voices. "Always them Germans! Ain't that a German voice yahring away? Listen!"

"Sure!" said Larry; "German, and not so far away. It'll be Fritz searching these dug-outs, these cellars. Boys, is it your wish that Fritz should come down here and take you into the open? Have you come all this way, right along here to within almost speaking distance of your mates, just to be hiked out by a few Fritzes?"

Bill stopped him.

"There's a row going on," he said; "it's men fighting, and not many of 'em—two or three at the most, I should say. Stay here, you boys. Let's get along, Jim and Larry and Nobby; we'll come back and report in a few minutes."

They crept along the passage, full of cobwebs and dirt and debris, and pitch dark at first, till they had traversed perhaps a hundred yards, passing here and there the entrances to other cellars; for bear in mind they were in the

country of the vine-growers of France, and huge cellars are required to store the wines produced by the vineyards which cluster along the sides of the Marne valley. Then a gleam of light lit the passage, and pushing on they came in time, after many twists and turns, to another cellar, from which issued now the voices of men engaged in a strenuous struggle. Creeping in, they found themselves in a large cellar of brick, on the floor of which two men rolled hither and thither, locked in a firm embrace, breathing heavily, sometimes shouting at one another. Their figures were fully lit up by an opening above, which gave light and ventilation to the cellar, and which presently allowed Bill and his friends to take in every atom of their surroundings.

"Two *poilus* fighting! and——" gasped Larry.

"And talking German!" said Nobby. "German!—listen to 'em!"

Bill clutched Jim by the arm. "Jingo! that one with his head close to the ground, it's—— I'd swear it!"

Jim took a firm hold of his young friend, for standing there at the entrance, peering into the cellar, he had at first not obtained so good a view of the combatants. But now for a moment the two men, locked in one another's arms, ceased their struggles to gain breath for a continuance of the conflict. Then it was that he obtained a full view of the face of the man who lay nearest the ground. It was Heinrich Hilker; no French uniform could disguise the scoundrel. But the other—no, he did not know him.

"It's—gee!—it's Heinrich the spy caught by a Frenchman," he muttered.

"A Frenchman! not it!" came bluntly from Nobby. "He's a-talkin' German now. It's two spies in the midst of a ruction."

As for Bill, Jim could feel him straining forward already, and heard his breath coming in deep gasps, and knew well that his young friend had recognized the wretch so near him who had been the cause of his father's death. A little more and Bill would have torn himself from Jim's grip and hurled himself upon the spy; but Alphonse intervened—Alphonse, now crazier than ever, Alphonse driven to desperation by the thought and the knowledge that Heinrich had hoodwinked him, and had dragged him here to the Marne only to dispose of him.

It was but ten minutes ago that he had suddenly detected Heinrich in the act of lifting a heavy stick with which to brain him, and thereupon Alphonse had cast himself upon the traitor. For those ten minutes the two had been locked in a deadly struggle, but now, as Bill and his friends looked on, it ended. For with a superhuman effort the madman suddenly freed his hands and gripped Heinrich by the neck. He lifted him upward, and then suddenly dashed him back, breaking his head upon the brick-lined floor as though it were an egg shell.

"And so—and so you are dead!—wretch! villain! spy!" Alphonse gasped, his rusty voice echoing in the cellar. "You, who enticed me to agree to your plans to lead you safely through the American lines so as to join our comrades. Ha! You—you were to slay me, and then, free of me, were to join the Germans, forgetting the reward I was to have, forgetting Paris and the loot to be obtained there. Well, you are dead—dead, you dog!"

The huge form of the pseudo-Frenchman was erected to its full height—the huge, bony frame standing out gaunt in the rays descending from the skylight above, the hands clenched, the blue uniform of a *poilu* skin-tight upon him—for there was never found a Frenchman requiring such a suit of clothes as Alphonse needed—he stood there leering, grinding his teeth, staring at the dead man. He kicked the inanimate body, and then, turning, glared up at the skylight, while Bill and his friends, horrified by the scene of which they had been the silent witnesses, crouched backwards into the passage which had led them to it, moved back from the entrance, waiting there, wondering what they should do.

It was then, within a few seconds, as Alphonse made ready to depart, his crazy mind still fixed upon looting some house in Paris, that there came a terrific crash above. Clouds of dust and bits of brick and dirt were projected into the passage, and then there was an appalling detonation, which shook these subterranean workings, which dislodged blocks and stones from the roof of the gallery, and which brought the roof of the cellar in upon Alphonse and the dead body of Heinrich, the German spy—the roof and the mass of wrecked dwellings above it. Indeed it was only by a miracle that Bill and his friends escaped destruction. They crept off through the dust-clouds to their comrades, and there sat down, moody at first, and then telling their story curtly, for it had moved them deeply. An hour later the

sounds of conflict waned, and soon afterwards, peering up from the cellar which sheltered them, they found the Germans in rapid retreat and Allied troops approaching.

"It's an American lot!" shouted Bill at the top of his voice.

"Sure!" gurgled Larry, and Jim was certain that the diminutive little fellow's legs positively shook. Perspiration was dropping from his forehead, and though Larry made every effort to appear nonchalant as of yore, and tipped his helmet farther forward, and even searched involuntarily, by force of habit, for that long-departed stump of cigar, yet he could not deceive Jim. Larry was upset—greatly so. The sight of those Americans had set him shaking, while it brought tears to Jim's own eyes. And then, who should suddenly accost the party? It was Dan—magnificent Dan—a true type of American manhood. Do you wonder that they fell upon each other, gripping hands? If they had been Frenchmen they would have embraced each other; as it was, even the stoical Nobby was gulping as Dan took his huge hand and shook it forcibly.

"Fine, fine!" was all that gallant soldier could say. "Fine! I'm glad to meet you."

No need to trace their movements further, and no need to say that within two weeks Nobby and his friends had been transferred to the British force, while Larry and Jim, and Bill too, by special arrangement, were attached to that American division in which Dan served. They are in France as we write. Shoulder to shoulder with those comrades of theirs they are opposing the most ruthless enemy that has ever threatened the liberties of mankind; shoulder to shoulder they will go through the work till the war is finished, till the Kaiser and his myrmidons are vanquished. They have seen much, these gallant men. They will see more before the war is done—when they have served longer under Foch's command.

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK UNDER FOCH'S COMMAND: A TALE OF THE AMERICANS IN FRANCE ***

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